THE STRUCTURES AND SIGNIFICANCE OF MIMESIS IN ADORNO'S AESTHETIC THEORY

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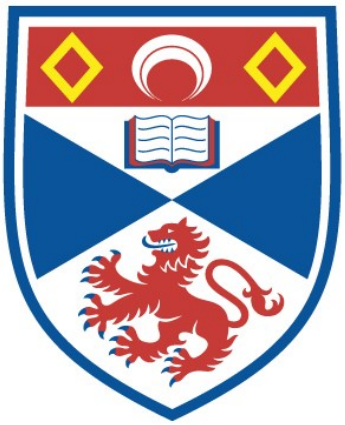

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The Structures and Significance of Mimesis

in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*

by

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Abstract

This thesis starts from the point of departure of asking why *Aesthetic Theory* is difficult to read. In answering this question it is argued that the difficulty of the work is a function of the unusual claims Adorno makes about the relation between art and philosophy, and that the presentation of these arguments exemplifies these claims. This complimentary relation between form and content has implications for the way Adorno can be understood as engaging the idea of mimesis. *Aesthetic Theory* should be understood as a theory of mimesis in modern art and as a mimetic work itself. Given this idea, the question of the readability of the work emerges as inseparable from the explicit claims Adorno makes for mimesis. If the work ultimately cannot be understood because Adorno does not define his concepts, or it is unexplainable for any other reason, then mimesis will be shown to be untenable.

The issue of the readability of *Aesthetic Theory* is explored in the Introduction through a discussion of issues arising from the recent history of Adorno's reception. Particular attention is paid to the differences between critics who have emphasised the significance of the particular claims Adorno makes against those who emphasise his method. Chapter 1 rejects this distinction while it argues that the character of Adorno's writing is uneven. That is to say, *Aesthetic Theory* cannot usefully be read in a uniform way. Chapter 1 considers different aspects of this lack of uniformity and argues that the identity of *Aesthetic Theory* as 'philosophy' is often tenuous as it moves in and out of other modes of argument.

Chapters 2 and 3 look at different aspects of the identity of *Aesthetic Theory* as philosophy. Chapter 2 explains the strategic significance of the work as a continuation of a tradition of philosophy from Hegel onwards. This tradition, it is argued, has explicitly understood the problem of philosophy as recognising itself as experience while it attempts to describe experience. Chapter 3 extends this theme into a consideration of philosophical form. If philosophy is understood as a mode of experience then its form as well as its content is significant. Through a consideration of Heidegger and Derrida, Chapter 3 examines the uniqueness of the philosophical form of *Aesthetic Theory*. Having made this distinction, Chapter 4 reads *Aesthetic Theory* as philosophical form, describing aspects of it as mimetic. Chapters 5 and 6 then give detailed readings of parts of *Aesthetic Theory* which are particularly relevant for an understanding of Adorno's theory of the mimetic potential of modern art. The concluding chapter argues that the internal consistency of *Aesthetic Theory* in its practice and definition of the crisis of mimesis in modernism has significant implications for the practice of art history and criticism of twentieth-century art.

I, Richard Hooker, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 90,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me, and that it has not been submitted in any application for a higher degree.

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I was admitted as a research student under Ordinance No. 12 on 1.10.1989 and as candidate for the degree of Ph.D. 1.10.90. The higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St. Andrews between 1989 and 1997.

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I hereby certify that the candidate has fulfilled the conditions of the Regulations appropriate for the degree of Ph.D. in the University of St. Andrews and that the candidate is qualified to submit this thesis in application for that degree.

date 16.1.1997 signature of supervisor.

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Introduction

ADORNO'S RECENT RECEPTION

In the Introduction to No. 56 of *New German Critique* and in a similar discussion in his book *Prismatic Thought*, Peter Hohendahl takes a usefully synoptic view of recent criticism of Adorno. Broadly speaking, he describes the recent reception of Adorno as kind of extended debate about how to read his work.[1] The problem of reception has always been an issue, because Adorno the writer is preoccupied with the idea of making his reader aware of what is going on in the reception of his arguments. This is a facet of his production which derives from a closeness to Hegel. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* does not simply describe experience, but organises its arguments in a way which seeks to exemplify the process it describes. It is the insight that Adorno's writing, like Hegel's, is not simply 'saying' what it means, but 'showing' what it means, that generates commentary such as Gillian Rose's: "It is impossible to understand Adorno's ideas without understanding the ways in which he presents them..."[2]

What Hohendahl is saying, however, is slightly different. He situates his remarks in the context of a discussion of the recent American reception of Adorno's work, of a "return to Adorno after years of relative neglect", and the diagnosis of something of a crisis in his reception: "a growing awareness now that Adorno criticism cannot continue in its traditional form". Without going into the specifics of his argument, Hohendahl claims there is a new awareness of "the interface between reading and appropriation" of Adorno's work.

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[1] Peter Hohendahl, "Adorno Criticism Today", *New German Critique* 56 (Spring-Summer 1992), pp. 3-16.
[2] Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno*, (London: Macmillan, 1978) p. 11.

If Hohendahl's diagnosis of a renewed emphasis on Adorno's importance for the present represents anything like a new phase in his reception, it is in marked contrast to the general tone and direction of the work through which Adorno's posthumous reputation developed. Various well known figures have produced powerful arguments to the effect that central aspects of Adorno's position have made his work obsolete. Indeed, despite the many different facets of Adorno's reception, the idea of his *obsolescence* is a remarkably persistent theme. For example, Habermas' critique of Adorno as a Nietzschean irrationalist, is often thought of as a move in the developing history of Critical Theory.[3] If Critical Theory is thus represented as a developing whole, embracing the work of both Adorno and Habermas, among others, then Critical Theory provides the context where Habermas' argument can be read as superseding Adorno. Habermas' argument supersedes Adorno because of its specific criticisms of Adorno, but also by virtue of Habermas' identity as a member of the 'second generation' of Critical Theorists.

More widespread diagnoses of Adorno's obsolescence are arguments which emphasise the extent to which his work is perceived to be inextricable from the particular cultural, social, and political conditions of its emergence. These arguments claim, in various ways, that the objects of Adorno's critique have changed to the extent that his work is no longer relevant. For example, Axel Honneth expresses a common view of Adorno when he argues that the co-ordinates of Adorno's thought were established in the 1930's with the critique of Nazi Germany. The issues which seemed pressing at the time are no longer relevant as premises of the critique of more recent, complex, and diverse manifestations of Western capitalism.[4] A similar principle motivates Peter Bürger's critique of Adorno's

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[3] Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. F. Lawrence, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1987), pp. 106-130.

[4] Honneth argues

> From the perspective of a philosophical-historical interpretation of fascism, the critical theory of Adorno's post war writings surveys the Germany restored by capitalism. The

aesthetics. Bürger argues that Adorno did not understand art as an institution. Adorno's oversight is compounded by history because, according to Bürger, the institutional dimension of art has become determining since Adorno was writing.[5] Adorno's obsolescence has also been reinforced by the impact of poststructuralism. While sometimes admiring Adorno's critique of the idea of subjectivity, more sophisticated poststructuralist readings of him understand his critique of the possibility of the idea of subjectivity to be "half-hearted", by comparison with its own, ostensibly more radical claims.[6]

Above and beyond these critiques of aspects of Adorno's position, certain, apparently definitive, problems with his thought have emerged, particularly with regard to his views on art. These criticisms coalesce around the idea of Adorno as a high modernist, emphasising his elitism, particularly as it is expressed in his claims for the significance of 'autonomous' art as distinct from mass culture. Taken with the widespread perception of Adorno's political quietism, in the period before his death in the late 1960's while *Aesthetic Theory* was being written, and the subsequent emergence of postmodernism as an idea of culture, it would appear that there are ample reasons for understanding Adorno's work as having little more than historical interest.

Some of these criticisms are justifiable, some are less so, but if, as Hohendahl suggests, there is new interest in Adorno, not as a historical figure not because of his historical interest, but because of the immediate relevance of his theory, then the multiple

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> theory is in a paradoxical situation; it is equipped with the conceptual tools for an analysis of totalitarian domination, although these are not obviously useful for an investigation of the normal form of capitalist domination.

Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power: Reflective stages in a Critical Theory*, trans. Kenneth Baynes,(Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1991) p. 58.

[5] See, for example, Peter Bürger, "Aporias of Modern Aesthetics", *New Left Review* 184 (Nov/Dec 1990), pp. 47-58.

[6] See Jean-François Lyotard, "Adorno as the Devil", trans. Robert Hurley, *Telos* 19 (Spring 1974), pp. 127-137. Wellmer uses the term "half-hearted" to describe Adorno's reception by poststructuralists in Albrecht Welmer "On the Dialectic of Modernism and Postmodernism", trans. David Roberts, *Praxis International* (Jan 1985), p. 339.

obsolescences of his reputation need to be confronted. It is in divergences between different attempts to *disprove* Adorno's obsolescence, that the question of the "intersection between reading and appropriation", develops a particular urgency. Hohendahl identifies various defences of Adorno, but the mutually corrosive positions of Hullot-Kentor and Fredric Jameson are particularly interesting because, despite their differences, both counter the idea of Adorno's obsolescence with the explicit claim that, as Hohendahl puts it: "the true Adorno has yet to be discovered..."[7] As such, they can be said to represent two extremes of a spectrum of arguments which attempt to defend Adorno, and their comparison highlights the major issues and difficulties of any attempt to define Adorno's contemporary relevance.

Hullot-Kentor reading Adorno

Hohendahl cites Robert Hullot-Kentor as exemplifying a strategy which: "describes or evaluates criticism of Adorno as intentional or unintentional misreadings caused by the particular biases of Adorno's critics", which comes with an "insistence on the absolute truth value of Adorno's theory".[8] It is not difficult to understand how Hohendahl arrived at this analysis of Hullot-Kentor's position. One of Hullot-Kentor's papers, "Back to Adorno", begins "The only legitimate 'back to' is one that calls for a return to what was never reached in the first place, which is the case with Adorno's work".[9] Hullot-Kentor cites deconstruction, bad translation, and Habermas, as being the major obstacles to the proper understanding of, in this instance, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Hullot-Kentor's method uses various devices to unearth what Adorno really meant to say, involving the detailed refutation of all those errors which he identifies as standing in the way of true understanding. For example, in challenging Habermas' misreading of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, he gets

[7] Peter Hohendahl, "Adorno Criticism Today", p. 10.
[8] Peter Hohendahl, "Adorno Criticism Today", p. 10.
[9] Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Back to Adorno", *Telos* 81 (Fall 1989), pp. 5-29.

involved with an argument about which parts of that jointly written work are attributable to Horkheimer and which to Adorno. He criticises the conclusions of the editor of Horkheimer's collected works for his "positivistic philology" in paying the wrong kind of attention to handwriting on the typescripts of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and thereby misunderstanding the importance of "collective dictation and intense discussion" in producing the final text.

The authority of this kind of detail derives from the accumulation of empirical evidence to explain a misreading of Adorno, followed up with emphatic claims for the correct reading of certain important passages or concepts. This, in turn, generates wider claims which serve to reinforce Hullot-Kentor's premise that the true Adorno has rarely, if ever been accessed. Thus, the final sentence of "Back to Adorno" reads "mistranslations must be sorted out before any real discussion of this pivotal text of Critical Theory can proceed in the English-speaking world".[10]

What are the implications of taking Hullot-Kentor's arguments seriously? His procedure implies the removal of Adorno out of the history of his reception, as it has thus far developed, and into the history of philosophy. That is to say, it is to move Adorno out of the exigencies of a living context where he can be used, appropriated, or misread, and into a philosophical context where a firmly established series of truth claims can be correctly and objectively identified. Once this 'translation' has been effected, Adorno's thought achieves the currency of the great philosophy, against which he can be measured, and his real status emerge. On the terms within which he operates, Hullot-Kentor's arguments are hard to refute, but what makes reading him on Adorno so odd, is that he clearly grasps a lot of what Adorno has to say, but there is no indication that the manner of his argument is in any way

[10] Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Back to Adorno", p. 29.

infected by the implications of Adorno's argument. This is quite proper. Hullot-Kentor is an exemplary academic reader of Adorno; he remains objective and sticks to the facts.

These claims about the implications of Hullot-Kentor's method can be further explained through their contrast with Jameson's *Late Marxism: Adorno or the Persistence of the Dialectic*. The parameters of Jameson's defence of Adorno derive from an argument that can be thought of as the inversion of Honneth's critique, described above. That is to say, Jameson argues that capitalist society has changed, not to make Adorno irrelevant, but to make him relevant again. We saw with Hullot-Kentor that the key to the true meaning of Adorno is in the hands of the objective critic/translator. For Jameson, with his particular brand of historical materialism, the meaning of a text is a function of changes in the materially defined conditions of its reception.

If this definitively separates their respective understandings of the 'location' of meaning, and therefore their methods of reading, there is another, more important difference. For Hullot-Kentor, the problem is about being correct in understanding what Adorno said. This is detached from the consideration of what it might *mean* for such an idea of correctness, if what Adorno says about 'truth' is taken seriously. It is pointless to ask the second question, on Hullot-Kentor's terms, because we do not yet have the necessary raw material *qua* the correct text, to answer it. Taking Adorno seriously both antecedes and succeeds Hullot-Kentor's critique. It antecedes critique, because otherwise there would be no motivation for bothering to work out what Adorno really meant. It succeeds critique, because only after Hullot-Kentor's revelation of correct meaning are we given the equipment to grasp Adorno as true. In neither instance does he give us reasons for taking Adorno seriously, beyond claims like the assertion that the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is a "pivotal text of Critical Theory". For Jameson, by contrast, the conditions for reading Adorno as 'true' are

different and, more important, in place. Jameson's primary concern is deploying Adorno's Marxism to explain the present state of experience under capitalism. Although flawed, Jameson's reading provides a basis on which to appreciate Adorno's potential strategic significance. In so doing, Jameson treats Adorno's work as 'live' in the sense that it is treated, not an object to be dissected, but as an accumulation of ideas and arguments which engage his own position directly. What complicates Jameson's relation to Adorno, however, is that having taken up this attitude towards reading, he misrepresents Adorno.

Jameson appropriating Adorno

In the Introduction to *Late Marxism*, "Adorno in the Stream of Time", Jameson makes the claim: "It now seems to me possible, then, that Adorno's Marxism, which was no great help in the previous periods, may turn out to be just what we need today".[11] How does Jameson justify his confidence? First, he establishes his relation to Adorno's work by attempting to make Adorno answerable to Orthodox, or Scientific Marxism. This, as Hohendahl indicates, is a controversial way of locating Adorno's work, because his Marxism is thoroughly mediated by other preoccupations.

At any rate, Jameson's strategy is to present Adorno's project as a response to a familiar problem for Orthodox Marxism. As Jameson puts it, "'To be a Marxist' necessarily includes the belief that Marxism is somehow a science: that is to say an axiomatic, an organon, a body of distinctive knowledges and procedures".[12] How can such a claim be protected from the sceptical assertion that any claim to truth ultimately disappears into provincialisms of one sort or another? Jameson initially bases his defence of Marxism on the observation that many different sometimes contradictory, versions of its claims have arisen.

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[11] Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or the Persistence of the Dialectic*, (London: Verso, 1990), p.5.
[12] Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or the Persistence of the Dialectic*,p.5.

This is a situation, according to Jameson, which testifies that there is no abstract Marxist "Truth" which claims universal scientific validity. Rather, the varieties of Marxism each express local "truth". In his words:

> The various Marxisms - for there are many of them, and famously incompatible with one another - are just that: the local ideologies of Marxist science in history and in concrete historical situations, which set not merely their priorities but also their limits. To say, then, that the Marxism of Lenin, or of Che, or of Althusser, or of Brecht (or indeed of Perry Anderson or of Eagleton, not to speak of myself) is that each one is situation specific to the point of encompassing the class determinations and cultural and national horizons of its proponents.[13]

Critically speaking, this looks like another expression of the old Orthodox argument that material reality determines thought. In its present guise, it frees any of the above from responsibility for the truth claims of their own arguments beyond their various local limitations. If Jameson is to sustain this position, he needs to have a rigorously defined explanation of what precisely constitutes the limits to the local truth of each thinker. This would then predict at what point each moves from science to ideology. Jameson does not do this. His purpose, however, is not to defend this argument directly, but to allow space for his characterisation of Adorno's significance in two ways. It allows him to claim that Adorno's particular brand of Marxism "fits" with the present in the "local" manner he has just described. Additionally, however, Jameson acknowledges that the significance of Adorno is not just that he "fits" the present; he claims Adorno does something more, something very unorthodox - he "shows perplexity". Jameson thus characterises Adorno in the terms he has used above, which is to say that Adorno makes truth claims about the world as a Marxist but, in "showing perplexity", he somehow pre-empts sceptical critique by undercutting his own position without sliding into absolute scepticism. Jameson does not put it as baldly as this,

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[13] Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or the Persistence of the Dialectic*, p.6.

but this formulation does describe quite neatly a way of thinking about an aspect of Adorno's own understanding of the immediate problem facing him.

The device through which Jameson says Adorno short-circuits scepticism is the idea that the possibility of truth resides not in the signifying capacity of a text, a truth claim, or an artwork, but as a condition of its *structure*. If we accept this claim, then a real problem emerges where Jameson reads Adorno as supplying a method that can be more or less universally applied in countering scepticism. That is, Jameson holds that what he identifies as the "structure" of Adorno's argument can be applied to the crisis of "Science" in the face of its critique as "ideology" in all the various forms with which Jameson is concerned: the crisis of Marxism, the crisis of the subject, the possibility of Marxist literary criticism in the face of its critique of poststructuralism, aesthetic modernism in the face of postmodernism, and more besides. Thus Jameson writes

> Adorno's prophesieds of the 'total system' finally came true in wholly unexpected forms ...late capitalism has all but succeeded in eliminating the final loopholes of nature and the unconscious, of subversion and aesthetic, of individual and collective praxis alike...[14]

Jameson the Marxist claims it is the transformation of experience by "late capitalism" which is the root cause of all the varieties of contemporary scepticism. Christopher Norris defines the grounds for scepticism in Jameson's position differently. For Norris, the scepticism generated by deconstruction infects Jameson's practice as literary critic and as a Marxist "Deconstruction is inimical to Marxist thought at the point where it questions the validity of *any* science or method set up in rigid separation from the play of textual meaning".[15] From the perspective of Jameson's strategy, which comes first, late capitalism or deconstruction, matters only in an abstract sense. Both are apparently all consuming and, once characterised thus, demand all consuming critique. On his own terms, Jameson the

[14] Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or the Persistence of the Dialectic*, p.5.
[15] Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, (London: Methuen, 1992), p. 83.

Marxist and Jameson the literary critic, face *structurally* identical problems. It is only as structures that society and literature can be truly known. In other words, for Jameson, the critique of deconstruction becomes the critique of late capitalism and *vice versa*. As a consequence, and as Norris has argued:

> Jameson pins his theory to a faith that method can retain some absolute validity even when history and meaning have been reduced to a constantly shifting interplay of tropes. He... seeks to preserve 'structure' as a mode of intelligibility immune to the assaults of sceptical doubt.[16]

Notwithstanding the problems inherent in Jameson's reduction of all skepticisms to a common structure, his elision of the different circumstances of scepticism does not take place in an abstract or neutral manner. Rather, certain claims or tendencies in Jameson's comprehension of "structure" accompany his argument, moving from one circumstance to another. For example, in talking about Adorno's philosophical writing, he identifies its "structure" quite specifically as "linguistic experiment, as *Darstellung*, and the invention of form". It is because Adorno is so aware of this aspect of writing, according to Jameson, "that it becomes interesting and appropriate to look at his own work in the same way". It is one thing to identify Adorno's interest in the structure of philosophical argument, it is quite another to claim that the structure of his, or indeed any philosophical text, resides in its quality as "linguistic experiment". Jameson acknowledges this, continuing,

> But then I need to correct this formulation of the matter in turn, and to insist that although Adorno certainly does have a 'style'... and although I sometimes talk about it as such, I doubt if the reading I propose can be thought of as a literary one in the restricted or trivialised sense.

Recognising that the "structure" of Adorno's work cannot be read purely in terms of its style, Jameson does not attempt to do so in a uniform way. Elsewhere, he seems to

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[16] Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, p. 79.

contradict himself by saying that it is Adorno's dialectic, not style, which is the all important "structure" of his work:

> So the deeper message of my book, at the level at which Adorno himself in his particularity becomes indistinguishable from the dialectic, has to do with the celebration of the dialectic as such.[17]

The problem, then, is that having placed such emphasis on "structure", Jameson cannot deliver a consistent picture of it because he does not have a theorised understanding of how he might, or how Adorno does, make the distinction between orders of "structure" in the different circumstances of philosophy and literature. Jameson's problem can be put another way, by saying that he has too abstract an understanding of the importance of "structure' in Adorno, in the sense that he thinks that such "structure' can be extracted from the specific interest of Adorno's discussion at any given moment. Having made this extraction, which is erroneous in terms of understanding Adorno's position, he then reads "structure" in a confused way. A symptom of this confusion in *Late Marxism* is the way Jameson's critical orientation towards Adorno's texts shifts between philosopher and literary critic, but in an apparently random, even evasive way, so it becomes difficult at times to know which he is being.

This absence of a strategy for developing a proper understanding of the potential relations between philosophical truth claim and literary/philosophical "structure", has an important function within Jameson's defence of Adorno's immediate relevance. It allows him to distance himself in two ways from aspects of Adorno's argument with which he feels uncomfortable. First, as we have seen, he is able, more or less at will, to characterise the value of any part of Adorno's argument as either primarily "structure" or "truth claim". He can concentrate on one or the other, depending on the relevance of a particular passage to his

[17] Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or the Persistence of the Dialectic*, p.11.

argument. Thus, Peter Osborne has identified the "displacement of philosophical by rhetorical analysis" as one of the two major methodological devices of Jameson's book.[18] Interestingly, Eva Geulen sees Jameson's problem slightly differently, concentrating her criticisms on Jameson's emphasis on the difference he attempts to establish between "the dialectic" as distinct from the particular claims Adorno makes. What, for Orsborne, is a split between the literary and the philosophical, is configured by Geulen as a split between dialectical "structure" and the secondary significance Jameson gives particular claims. This, as Geulen points out, enables Jameson to argue that

> ...the most precarious opinions Adorno held *vis-à-vis* politically committed art or his refusal to see any critical potential in popular culture are minor obstacles, easily overcome by this dialectical *tour de force*. Jameson argues that "...these positions of Adorno - so easily reducible to 'elitist' opinions...- are probably better *dramatised* as moves against a variety of other imaginary or ideal-typical protagonists.... The various positions become characters and their *abstract ballet* turns out to be transferable to areas very different from art" (Geulen's emphasis).[19]

In other words, the idea of Adorno's obsolescence, tied to his views about popular culture and his elitism, are construed by Jameson not as truth claims in a philosophical sense, but as illustrations in a mode of dialectical argument whose "structure" is what is important. In this way the "true Adorno" remains unsullied by the various unpalatable (for Jameson) specifics of his position. What should be becoming evident, then, is that Jameson is not just confusing about the relation between truth claims and structure, he is confused about the nature of that "structure". At different moments he identifies it as "linguist experiment" and at others as "the dialectic". This lack of clarity allows different characterisations of Jameson's strategy so, although Osborne and Geulen agree on the dynamic behind Jameson's problem,

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[18] Peter Osborne, "A Marxism for the Postmodern? Jameson's Adorno", *New German Critique* 56 (Spring-Summer 1992), p. 173.
[19] Eva Geulen, "A matter of Tradition", *Telos* 89 (Fall 1991), p.155.

they disagree on precisely what he is extracting from Adorno at the cost of a neglect for Adorno's specific claims.

If this gives us some idea of Jameson's problems with Adorno, it certainly raises a variety of issues about the intersection between reading and appropriation. As a reader, in the sense that Hullot-Kentor is a reader, Jameson is wrong about a lot of things, as the almost uniformly hostile reviews of his book make plain. Notwithstanding Jameson's factual errors, it can be argued that the impact of his argument is both similar to and very different form Hullot-Kentor's. Both defences of Adorno attempt to remove his thought from those of its aspects which might imply obsolescence. I have argued that the impact of Hullot-Kentor's argument is to abstract Adorno's thought into a series of philosophically digestible truth claims. Geulen emphasises a similar tendency towards abstraction in Jameson's argument, only Jameson abstracts what he sees as the "structure" of Adorno's thought. A helpful way to frame the similarity and difference between Hullot-Kentor and Jameson, and to tease out some of the implications of this comparison, is to consider it in the light of a related split that emerged in the early reception of Hegel.

Disagreement over which was the "true" Hegel was the occasion for a division between the so called "Old" and "Young" Hegelians. In a short Preface to an anthology of the writings of the Young Hegelians, Lawrence Stepelevich describes the major elements in the dispute, and links it with what he calls a recent "Hegel-renaissance. He begins,

> A distinction must be made between being a Hegelian philosopher and a student of Hegelian philosophy, for the practice of this philosophy extends well beyond the mere scholarly recollection of that thought. To philosophise, as a Hegelian, is to take up, develop, and apply the dialectical methodology of Hegel to a point that would extend beyond the limits found in Hegel himself.[20]

[20] Lawrence Stepelevich, (ed.), *The Young Hegelians: An Anthology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. ix.

It is this attitude towards Hegel which characterises the Young Hegelians, in contrast to the Old Hegelians, who, Stepelevich quotes Löwith as saying: "preserved Hegel's philosophy literally".[21] Having made this distinction, Stepelevich goes on to describe a more recent "so-called 'Hegel-Renaissance'", an aspect of which was the establishment of the 'Hegel-Archiv' in 1958. The function of this archive will be the publication of a complete critical edition of Hegel's writings. Stepelevich notes that this project is not expected to be completed before the first quarter of the next century. "But", he continues,

> .... any 'renaissance' deserving of the name - just as did the original Italian - expand beyond a merely reverential collection of past truths and go on to generate its own world. If it does not it is not a true renaissance, but an ever more empty formal exercise devoted to a dead system, which in this case would become nothing else than a noxious autopsy upon the Hegelian corpus. Young Hegelianism, which drew its spirit directly from Hegel... is far from resting content with such autopsies.[22]

Now, it is too simplistic to align the kind of position represented by Hullot-Kentor with the Old Hegelians and Jameson with the Young Hegelians. In the light of Stepelevich's commentary, however, there is enough of a similarity at least to question the assertion that Hullot-Kentor is the "reader" and Jameson the "appropriator". Jameson's reading of Adorno is symptomatic of a problem inherent in the reception of any Hegelian philosophy. That is, any philosophy which claims to both 'say' what it means and 'show' what it means, is vulnerable to having one or other of these emphasised at the expense of the other. As we have seen the question of the separability of Hegel's dialectic from his specific truth claims is a fundamental issue in the history of the reception of Hegel. Ironically Michael Rosen has criticised Adorno's reading of Hegel on these very grounds. He accuses Adorno of wrongly presuming Hegel's dialectic can be extracted from Hegel's claim to have achieved "Absolute Knowledge".[23] Certainly Jameson is no disciple of Adorno. He quite shamelessly makes

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[21] Lawrence Stepelevich, (ed.), *The Young Hegelians: An Anthology*, p. x.
[22] Lawrence Stepelevich, (ed.), *The Young Hegelians: An Anthology*, p. x.
[23] Michael Rosen, *Hegel's Dialectic and its Criticism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

Adorno out to be things which he is not, but *in the way he does this*, Jameson demonstrates that he and Adorno have related ends. They are both preoccupied with aspects of the problem of modern scepticism, and how it might be avoided. Moreover, both understand this in a way that parallels what Stepelevich identifies as the Young Hegelian attitude to Hegel, which is "...as much a mode of philosophical apprehension as a form of philosophy to be apprehended, and as much a methodology as a passing event".[24] Jameson's 'mode of apprehension' is very different from Adorno's, and he misrepresents Adorno as a consequence. At the same time, it is because he understands Adorno's argument as 'a mode of apprehension' in the first place, that he attains a degree of proximity to Adorno, quite absent from the kind of readings of Adorno presented by Hullot-Kentor.

Reading Jameson appropriating Adorno

Another aspect of the critique of Jameson's *Late Marxism* emphasises a slightly different theme, concentrating on Jameson's mode of literary critical behaviour. For Peter Osborne, it is not just a case of Jameson's emphasis on the literary structure of Adorno's work. He suggests Jameson's book can be read "as a case study in the problematic relationship of "literary" to "philosophical" theory more generally"[25] and that it is characterised methodologically by

> ...the displacement of philosophical by rhetorical analysis and an associated pragmatic reduction of judgement to the parameters of a conjuncturalist conception of hegemonic intervention into current theoretical debates.[26]

I have already discussed some of the implications of the first point Osborne makes. The second, however, is slightly different. It is also interesting because it reappears forcefully in Hullot-Kentor's scabrous review of *Late Marxism*. Osborne's argument is that Jameson

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[24] Lawrence Stepelevich, (ed.), *The Young Hegelians: An Anthology*, p. x.
[25] Peter Osborne, "A Marxism for the Postmodern? Jameson's Adorno", p. 173.
[26] Peter Osborne, "A Marxism for the Postmodern? Jameson's Adorno", p. 173.

tends to see parallels between Adorno's position and contemporary debates in literary theory. Using Osborne's word, Jameson then "translates" Adorno into the terms of that debate, at the expense of making judgements about the philosophical import of Adorno's argument. For Osborne this "reveals itself as an evasion of theory, or more precisely, of *judgement*".[27] It is a case of assimilating Adorno to the terms of the "institutional hegemony of literary theory in the United States", rather than generating illuminating insights into Adorno own claims.[28] For Hullot-Kentor, Jameson's comparisons of Adorno with other recent or contemporary thinkers tends to be slap-dash, unexplained, and functions as a way of superficially familiarising Adorno:

> Like his English alter-ego, Terry Eagleton, Jameson is a conventional thinker whose will to occupy the front seat on the flying wedge of literary criticism, combined with an omnivorous intellectual metabolism, led him to genuinely anti-conventional work, which he regularly scrambles. This does not bother his readership: anxious to share his velocity, they take the incoherence as a mark of authenticity on ideas that they are content to let hover overhead, reserving their attention for tracking the pulse of *idées reçues* just below the surface.[29]

This, and Osborne's problems with Jameson, are quite legitimate ways of characterising aspects of his infuriating way of arguing. At the same time, there is a very indistinct boundary between that order of criticism which is specifically directed at demonstrable short comings in what Jameson has to say, and more general grumblings about his "careerism", the "institutional dominance of literary theory in the United States" and questions of Jameson's competence as a critic of Adorno *per se*. Such criticisms imply, on the part of Jameson's critics, some fairly clear notion of the kind of thinker Adorno is. Indeed, the question of the critical competence of a particular reading of his work is inseparable from the institutional conventions of whichever discipline within which Adorno's

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[27] Peter Osborne, "A Marxism for the Postmodern? Jameson's Adorno", p. 180.
[28] Peter Osborne, "A Marxism for the Postmodern? Jameson's Adorno", p. 192.
[29] Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Suggested Reading: Jameson on Adorno", *Telos* 89 (Fall 1991), p. 172.

work is located. When Jameson is accused of lacking judgement he is being criticized for not understanding that you must be a philosopher to read Adorno properly. The issue of critical "etiquette", and Jameson's lack of it, comes across particularly strongly in the opening of Hullot-Kentor's review of *Late Marxism*:

> Fredric Jameson is one of the great tattooed men of our times. Every inch of flesh is covered: that web of cats cradles coiling up the right calf are Greimas and Levi-Strauss; dripping over the right shoulder, under the sign of the Cimabue Christ - the inverted crucifixion - hangs Derrida; and hardly recognisable in those many overlapping splotches of colour is just about everybody else... [30]

Hullot-Kentor admits he is mocking here, but it is hard not to see in this parody a real anxiety at the ill-disciplined and non-philosophical allusion-making of Jameson's "omnivorous intellectual metabolism", by contrast with his own tightly defined and empirically driven research.

It is not that Jameson's position is any less tightly defined than Hullot-Kentor's, but the disciplinary boundaries between literature and philosophy become especially problematic when they are simultaneously adhered to and used to supersede each other. Philosophy has traditionally defined itself, to use a phrase of Danto's, as "wanting necessity".[31] Philosophy wants to make truth claims applicable to all possible situations; its method seeks to address all situations. This applies especially to the relation between the philosophical reader and Adorno's philosophy. From this perspective, what Jameson should do, with due humility, is say "I will read Adorno's work in terms of its literary structure and see what interesting insights this might produce". Instead, Jameson wants necessity for his idea of "structure", which is to say he wants to displace not only philosophy's claim to necessity, but

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[30] Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Suggested Reading: Jameson on Adorno", p. 177.
[31] Arthur Danto, "Philosophy as/and/of Literature", in A. Cascardi, (ed.), *Literature and the Question of Philosophy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1987), p. 17.

philosophy's method of reading, and replace it with his method of rhetorical reading, allusion making etc., which is held to be equally applicable to all situations, including reading Adorno.

The "wanting necessity", implicit in the methods of both Hullot-Kentor and Jameson, is closely related to their strong claims for Adorno's significance as having, or potentially having, truth value. These claims for Adorno are also associated with the tendency not to differentiate between Adorno's different works. As Geulen points out, Jameson repeatedly makes claims for the "whole" Adorno. It is clear from his "Back to Adorno" that Hullot-Kentor thinks it is not just *Dialectic of Enlightenment* which has been variously misrepresented and mistranslated, but all of Adorno's work. This is not to say Jameson and Hullot-Kentor are not interested in detail, far from it, but that every detail is likely to be measured by the same necessary critical standard and the same convention of reading. Together, these presuppositions form the working assumption that Adorno's identity as a writer remains consistent through all his work, that all Adorno's work is about the same thing - "the truth," - and that "truth" can be extracted using a uniquely suitable method for doing so.

Reading, 'mimesis' and *Aesthetic Theory*

The issues emerging out of the recent reception of Adorno are interesting in themselves, but the direction the argument has taken has a particular relevance for any attempt to describe "mimesis" in Adorno's thought in general, and *Aesthetic Theory* in particular. The reason for this is relatively simple.

The recent reception of Adorno does indeed raise the question of the relationship between "reading" and "appropriation," but this is not a straight forward distinction between modes of critical behavior. It is as much a debate about the kind of thinker Adorno is.

Jameson is not claiming that his is simply a better critical method, he is saying that Adorno's writing is a kind of thing that needs to be read in a way that is not strictly philosophical. Thus Jameson's "appropriation" is not just saying things about Adorno that other readers disagree with, it is about appropriating Adorno for the "literary" as against the "philosophical". At its most far-reaching the controversy surrounding Jameson's book is about the identity of Adorno's work as "philosophical" or "literary".

A premise of this reading of *Aesthetic Theory* is that Adorno's identity as a thinker is not usefully addressed when thought of as a function of his whole oeuvre. Rather, it will be argued Adorno's identity changes significantly within *Aesthetic Theory*. Among other things, this means adopting a critical attitude towards reading the work which does not adhere to the notion that a unique convention for doing so will suffice. So, although the scope of the argument about reading Adorno as a whole is perhaps spurious, the axis around which the debate has orientated itself is not. The question of the relation between the "philosophical", "the literary" and the "arts" is one of the defining problematics Adorno addresses in *Aesthetic Theory*. The deployment of "mimesis" is pivotal within that problematic.

For Adorno, art is different from philosophy for all sorts of reasons. At the same time, both art and philosophy can be minimally construed as having "mimetic moments". More strongly, it is true to say that art and philosophy can only have truth value in so far as they exist in a "mimetic" relation to their objects. We therefore need to understand Adorno as theorising *about* art's mimetic relation to the world. At the same time, this "theorising about," is taking place within the parameters of an idea of how *Aesthetic Theory qua* philosophy might exist in a mimetic relation to its object, which is art.

In other words, there are at least two different orders of mimetic activity involved in *Aesthetic Theory*. One is the mimetic relation of *philosophical argument* to its object. The

other, a theory of how modern *art* can be seen to be mimetic of the world. These different manifestations of "mimesis" are definitively inseparable in *Aesthetic Theory*, and this is not just because we understand Adorno as "showing" as well as "saying" what he means. The reasons for this inseparability can be explained as follows.

An aspect of the definition of a "mimetic" act is that it implies some kind of imitation of its object. It follows that to recognise philosophical mimesis, it cannot be anticipated as an abstract condition; it only reveals itself in the imitation of *something*. One therefore has to grasp what is being imitated, in *Aesthetic Theory*, which is art. Equally, to understand art as "mimetic", one has to understand how it is "mimetic" of the world. Within this framework, the identities of "philosophy", "art", and "the world" are far from obvious; indeed they are obscure. This means that although there is are going to be connections between philosophy, art, and the world, they will not always be evident: sometimes they are "said", sometimes they are "shown". On a purely pragmatic basis, it would seem obvious that if we are interested in say, Adorno's theory of how modern art is "mimetic" of the world, we should pay attention to the way that art is "mimicked" through Adorno's philosophical argument. Indeed this is the case, but more fundamentally and controversially, in *Aesthetic Theory* philosophical "mimesis" and "mimesis" in art are mutually dependent. Put another way, neither can be successful without the other. Put another way, the "mimetic" potential of an art work cannot be released except through philosophical reflection. Moreover the philosophical reflection on a work of art has itself, in some way, to be mimetic of the art work. Now, without becoming bogged down at this stage in trying to define "philosophical mimesis" in *Aesthetic* Theory, we can be quite clear that it does not take the shape of the isolated philosophical judgement. This being the case, when trying to discuss "mimesis" in *Aesthetic Theory*, it is simply not useful to make the kind of separation between philosophical

content and form that seems to be emerging in some of the recent reception of Adorno. The identification of "mimesis" in *Aesthetic Theory* demands an attitude towards the work which does not force a distinction between philosophical form and content through a methodological predisposition. To do so, is not just to adhere to a standard of critical probity, but to be a bad reader, because it will misconstrue "mimesis" in *Aesthetic Theory*.

The structure of "mimesis" in *Aesthetic Theory*

Within the idea of an openness to form and content, we need some abstract idea of how "mimesis" manifests itself in all contexts of its appearance in *Aesthetic Theory*. It goes without saying that this order of analysis will be incomplete, but it is necessary as a means of beginning to map what is at stake in the idea of "mimesis".

"Mimesis" must be understood with reference to Adorno's engagement with two other concepts: "mediation" and "autonomy". Every act of "mimesis" must be understood as "mediated", which means it cannot be understood as an isolated phenomenon; it is shaped by the "context" of its articulation. As a consequence, Adorno's evaluation and definition of "mimesis" changes according to the context of its appearance in *Aesthetic Theory*. Such potentially infinite fluidity can be modified somewhat when we understand that although the conditions that govern refinement of a particular "mimetic" act are obviously not uniform, otherwise abstract definitions would suffice. It is not therefore necessary to abandon the possibility of identifying broadly different contexts of the deployment of "mimesis" in *Aesthetic Theory*. This is an indication of the idea that every act of "mimesis" is not sufficiently defined by its "mediations". It also has a degree of "autonomy" and cannot be explained purely as a function of its context.

It has already been suggested that "mimesis" is operative in philosophy and art, and this can be extended to include all representations. "Representation" here designates anything from the "representation of experience to consciousness," to a work of art, or a philosophical argument. In this general sense, "representation" is the sole preoccupation of *Aesthetic Theory*. Adorno's discussion is contained, however, because he "organizes" it around the consideration of the way "society", "philosophy" and "art" functions as systems of representation in mediating individual representations. The potential clarity of this framework is jeopardized when we begin to understand that neither "society", "philosophy" nor "art" in isolation provides the basis for any sufficient definition of an individual representation. It is precisely the insufficiency of these three systems of representation which gives all individual representations their indeterminacy. Adorno somewhat coyly admits that the premise that there is no "ground" for his definition of the individual representation generates "dialectical turbulence".

What gives this potential morass any order is that Adorno is equally adamant that although "society", "philosophy" and "art" are mediating systems of representation, they are also "autonomous". None of them can be reduced to the terms of the others. Works of philosophy and art are not definable as purely social phenomena, but then neither can art or philosophy sufficiently represent society. The same prohibition against one-sided definitions pertains to every conceivable relation within the matrix of concerns addressed in *Aesthetic Theory*.

Within this pervasive emphasis on the principle that everything is "mediated" by its relation to everything else, the possibility of "mimesis" only exists because the principle of "autonomy" holds that everything has some kind of potentially discrete identity. This triangular relation between "mediation," "autonomy," and "mimesis" can by no means be

taken for granted, and can be characterized as the aspiration of *Aesthetic Theory*. That aspiration is rarely, if ever fulfilled. The way to read *Aesthetic Theory* is to understand it as explaining the conditions which might make such a relationship possible and why it is such an elusive state.

The complexity of this context for the discussion of "mimesis" within *Aesthetic Theory* aside, Adorno's arguments about the significance of "mimesis" relate to other arguments at various levels. Although it can be productive to compare Adorno's theory of "mimesis" to other such theories, these comparisons serve only to identify "mimesis" as an order of representation. They do not give credit to the strategic importance of "mimesis" within his argument. It is by thinking about "mimesis" in terms of its strategic significance, that Adorno's position can begin to be given some kind of identity in terms of its relation to those other thinkers.

Reading the strategic significance of "Mimesis" and *Aesthetic Theory*

One way to situate Adorno's project is to think of it as developing within the implications of two orders of recent scepticism. One posits the claim that language is the condition of experience (Heidegger), the other that experience has been so thoroughly transformed by capitalism that it is incapable of any "real" relationship with the world (Lukács). Heidegger and Lukács can both be read as offering ways out of the scepticism they generate, but Adorno is unconvinced and more interested in their arguments as reasons to be sceptical than the means they develop of countering it. From this perspective on Heidegger and Lukács, the possibility of meaning in general and "mimesis" in particular, is radically curtailed, if not prohibited. Adorno takes this problem particularly seriously. Indeed, he can properly be said to have played an important role in developing and emphasising the sceptical

implications of Heidegger's and Lukács' thought, against any claim to produce or identify any definitively adequate representation of the world. What does this mean for how we should understand the strategic significance of "mimesis" in *Aesthetic Theory*? "Mimesis" has been variously construed as implying one or more of the following: "an act of imitating," or a "copy," a "representation," a "superficial resemblance". Each of these aspects of its definition is compromised by skepticisms which claim that neither language, nor experience under capitalism, can perform the necessary stepping out of themselves to allow such re-presentation.

It is against this background that we need to understand Adorno's engagement with "mimesis" and, as a general rule, we need to think of it first and foremost as an unstable mode of representation. If such instability can be thought of as an objective characteristic of "mimesis" in *Aesthetic Theory*, then its deployment is additionally problematic because, as we have seen, it becomes operative in Adorno's thought in a range of different guises. "Mimesis" is engaged in *Aesthetic Theory* as a mode of art *and* a mode of doing philosophy. It is also clear that, although in *Aesthetic Theory* mimesis in art and mimesis in philosophy are different, they are mutually dependent modes of experience. That is to say, neither is possible without the other. The issues this mutual dependence generates are far reaching for understanding *Aesthetic Theory*. For the moment, however, we need to think about what it might mean to read *Aesthetic Theory* as a "mimetic" text, and this means thinking of it as an act of representation.

This demand creates problems in itself because it is by no means clear what it might mean to describe a philosophical work as "representational". Until Hegel, philosophy had not been accustomed to thinking of itself as representational beyond the obvious idea of a correspondence between a philosophical concept and its object. Philosophy remains generally

poorly equipped to understand itself as representation, and this is part of the context which makes Adorno's reception so tortuous. Indeed, one of the reasons Jameson gets into such difficulties is that he applies conventions for the analysis of literary representation too rigidly to a philosophical text.

If Jameson's critical impulses are correct in diagnosing the problem of representation in Adorno, then this means that the representational identity of Adorno's arguments need to be re-thought. As a preliminary suggestion of what this might involve, it is worth considering one of the most familiar theories of representation, as it is developed by Gombrich in his paper "Meditations on a Hobby Horse". It might seem unnecessarily tendentious to refer to Gombrich here, as doing so invites the charges of irrelevance and appropriation levelled at Jameson. All the same, the risk is worth taking, because one of Gombrich's arguments about the possibility of representation is directly relevant to explaining the particular problems arising from trying to read *Aesthetic Theory* as a representational work.

In the paper "Meditations on a Hobby Horse", Gombrich argues that, to be taken for a representation, something must be taken for a substitute for what it represents. For substitution to occur, two criteria according to Gombrich, must be fulfilled. There must be resemblance, but there must also be relevance. To explain himself, Gombrich uses the example of a child who takes a stick for a hobby horse. "It needed two conditions, then, to turn our stick into our hobby horse: first, that its form made it just possible to ride on it; secondly - and perhaps decisively - that riding mattered". In other words, for a resemblance to be taken as a representation, there has to be some reason for doing so.

Now, obviously Gombrich was thinking about visual representation, but his argument is applicable to reading *Aesthetic Theory* because of the suggestion that its success as representation is contingent on a configuration of resemblance and relevance. That is to say,

to see *Aesthetic Theory* as a representational work means it must have some resemblance to something, and, it needs to matter that it should. As previously suggested, the latter condition is already problematic because of the apparent implausibility of reading any philosophical text as representational. Allowing that possibility means looking to Hegel's example. Understanding *Aesthetic Theory* as a representational work is impossible without understanding Hegel. Consider the following description of Hegel's philosophy:

> Hegel, as both Hegelians and anti-Hegelians argue, has offered the greatest solution to, or at least formulation of, the problem of representation. According to Hegel's unification of logic and ontology, the "world," "reality," "the absolute," can be represented truthfully because the representation and the thing represented are not separate entities linked arbitrarily by a philosopher's subjectivity; rather, things and thought are engaged in a common movement toward self representation.[32]

Hegel made claims for his philosophy of as a perfect identity between itself and what it represents. Paraphrasing Gombrich, "It needed two conditions, then, to turn Hegel's philosophy into the world: first, that its form made it just possible to understand it; secondly - and perhaps decisively - that absolute truth mattered". Now, concentrating on the second claim, Hegel tells us clearly why his philosophy is relevant: it matters because Kant had left open the problem of scepticism, and this needs to be discounted as a legitimate philosophical disposition.[33] The claim to resemblance derives from Hegel's attempt to demonstrate that, as the above quotation puts it, "things and thought are engaged in a common movement toward self representation".

From the point of view of reading *Aesthetic Theory* as a representational work, the most important things about Hegel is the possibility of some order of philosophical resemblance to the world which is not restricted to the simple idea of a correspondence

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[32] John H. Smith, *The Spirit and Its Letter: Traces of Rhetoric in Hegel's Philosophy of Bildung*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988) p. x.

[33] See for example, G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977) p. 47.

between a concept and its object. One sense in which *Aesthetic Theory* can be understood as representational, therefore, is that Adorno, like Hegel, seeks to exploit the idea that a philosophical argument represents the world in the way it "moves".

I will be arguing that Adorno understands this movement as inextricable from the truth claims made along the way, but the appearance of a possible distinction makes his position vulnerable to misrepresentation as, either a series of "obsolete" truth claims or a "dialectic". As we saw in the argument between the Old and Young Hegelians, they split on whether the truth of Hegel was in his claim to have achieved absolute knowledge, or in his method. In other words, is Hegel better thought of as having represented the world in the claim for absolute knowledge, or is that claim inseparable from "the movement towards it"? The same quandary reappears in the reception of Adorno, and alerts us to the general problem of reception pertaining to any representational philosophy. The parallel with Hegel's reception, however, only establishes a problem within the possibility of philosophy as representation in general. This is not the end of complications pertaining to reading *Aesthetic Theory*.

In addition to the risk of a false split between particular truth claims and the movement of the argument as a whole, *Aesthetic Theory* takes place within the presumption of scepticism, which is quite alien to Hegel. Adorno repeatedly situates his project as an attempt to work through the implications of Hegel's failure. A consequence of Adorno's skepticism about the adequacy of philosophy is that the parallel between the reception of Hegel and Adorno needs to be qualified. Returning to the language of Gombrich's argument, Adorno's skepticism directly raises the question of whether philosophy "matters" any more. This raises again the problem of reading *Aesthetic Theory* as representational, beyond the unfamiliarity of doing so in the first place.

To recapitulate, the unexpectedness of the idea of philosophy as representation applies equally to Hegel and *Aesthetic Theory.* On Gombrich's terms, philosophy must be made to "matter" as representation or its representational quality will be missed. As has been suggested, one minimal way of doing this might imply being open to the notion of the work having multiple identities. Once we have alerted ourselves to the necessity of this mode of critical behavior, however, the skeptical tenor of Adorno's thinking questions the possibility of philosophy *per se*, and this applies to traditional philosophy and the representational model implied by Hegel's argument. In other words, having got past the problematic idea of thinking and reading philosophy as representation, when reading *Aesthetic Theory* we have to understand that that mode of philosophizing is itself radically tenuous. It is here that "mimesis" has its significance. "Mimesis" is only ever a "superficial resemblance" that does not conform to secure ideas of truth. For Adorno, even though we know concepts are inadequate, we have to deploy them as if they were, if we are to generate an argument whose movement can indirectly relate to the object of philosophical attention. It is here that Adorno's attitude to reason can be identified as radically different from Heidegger and Lukács. Adorno's relation to these thinkers will be discussed in due course, but what needs to be emphasised here, is that the truth value of "mimesis" cannot be separated from its tenuous state.

In reading Adorno, therefore, one should be less interested in the question of whether Adorno's philosophy "matters", than with the implications of that question for thinking of it as representation. It is precisely at this level that the criteria of truthfulness invoked by a critical reading become entangled with the truth claims of the argument it claims to represent. There is a very real sense in which the claim for the truth value of what Adorno say will make representation "matter" too much. Irrespective of the critical identity of the reader, the pre-

emptive desire to define Adorno as true or false will tend to force a distinction between particular truth claims and the movement of his argument. It is only thus separated that they can be invoked as having some stable truth value, but it is precisely this stability which neutralises the possibility of reading the ephemeral nature of "mimetic" truth. To put it bluntly, to be certain of Adorno's truth or falsity is to be certain to miss the mimetic aspect of his arguments.

The problems generated by recognising the "delicacy" of mimesis in *Aesthetic Theory* might, to some extent, be mitigated by considering the following strategies.

First, not being too preoccupied with whether and how what Adorno says might be of immediate interest to the present. This is not to abandon judgement of the truth value of Adorno's work. Rather, it is to try to avoid predetermining the shape that truth might take. Allowing for this possibility, we may be able to avoid going through contortions to attempt to salvage, or explain away, those aspects of Adorno which do not mesh with a preconceived global idea of how and why what Adorno says has truth value. In part this means engaging with Adorno's works in a way that pays as much attention to the differences between them as their similarities. Although other works will be referred to, they will be used to explain *Aesthetic Theory* and the claims made about *Aesthetic Theory* do not extend to his other work.

Second, if we abandon strong claims for the truth value of Adorno's work, we can avoid the problem of definitively disproving his obsolescence. This is not to admit Adorno's obsolescence, but to allow the historical element in Adorno's thought its place. One of Hegel's ideas was that philosophy was in some way restricted to the historical conditions of its emergence. If we take the same to apply to Adorno, then there are three possibilities: a)Adorno is obsolete b)Adorno is correct c) Adorno's idea of truth might include the idea of

its own obsolescence. If we admit the possibility of c), then a) and b) look like partial understandings. To claim that Adorno is obsolete because his idea of society is out of date, might be rather like saying that the impact of the Black Death on Europe's population would have been minimal had there been a programme of mass vaccination. This is of course true, but it involves using the power of hindsight in a spurious way. If we take assertions of Adorno's obsolescence in the same spirit, then the problem of showing how he might be right, is no longer a matter of distilling the truth of Adorno's thought from the historical, but of understanding that Adorno worked with the idea that truth and history are mutually defining. As I understand him, Albrecht Wellmer gives support to this idea in suggesting the importance of avoiding the compartmentalisation of Adorno's thought. Writing about various critiques of *Aesthetic Theory* he claims

> That all the above-mentioned critics are at least partially correct seems to me to be indisputable. At the same time their critiques leave one with the feeling of a disproportion between the results of critique and its object: as though the real substance of Adorno's aesthetics had escaped the critics.[34]

On the face of it, Wellmer puts himself in the same camp as Hullot-Kentor and Jameson. Like them he implies that "the true Adorno has yet to be discovered". What differentiates him from them, however, is that he is restricting the claim to a part of Adorno's thought, namely his *Aesthetic Theory* and, he is allowing for the fact that the criticisms of that work are "partially correct". He goes on to say, rather cryptically, that: "The latter [Adorno's aesthetics] is in danger of all partial critiques i.e., those which ultimately remain detached from their object". I read Wellmer here as implying the need for a kind of pre-emptive collapse of critical distance in order to prevent a single dominant idea or method from driving our understanding of Adorno. *Aesthetic Theory* does not obviously fit into existing

[34] Albrecht Wellmer, "Truth, Semblance, Reconciliation: Adorno's Aesthetic Redemption of Modernity", trans. M. Cooke, *Telos* 62 (Winter 1984-85), p. 90.

disciplinary definitions and conventions. One can be a supremely competent philosopher, or literary theorist, and not maintain that standard of competence when it comes to doing justice to *Aesthetic Theory*. Avoiding this problem means having a far less developed critical identity than either Hullot-Kentor or Jameson. More tangibly, it becomes important to provide some kind of argument about what the kind of thing *Aesthetic Theory* is, in order to be able to respond to it in a way that is not wholly determined by pre-established procedures.

In Chapter 1 I describe some different explanations for the difficulty of *Aesthetic Theory*. While I emphasise the importance of allowing all of them a measure of control on how the work is read, the chapter concludes with the discussion of *Aesthetic Theory* as a thoroughly "mediated" text, and discusses what this means in terms of defining the work.

Chapter 2 traces a virtual history of philosophy in developing an increasingly complex idea of "mediation". As ideas of "mediation" develop complexity, so philosophy's understanding of its "mediated" relation to its object becomes increasingly complex. This process is described through Hegel's critique of Kant, Marx's critique of Hegel, Lukács' critique of Marx, and Adorno's critique of Lukács. This is not meant as a history of "mediation", or to summarise the impact of other thinkers on Adorno. Rather, the aim is to address a theme which, I will argue, repeats itself in each of the above critiques. Hegel claims that the conditions for the sceptical implications of Kant's philosophy are already established in the way Kant conceived of the task of philosophy, and orientated himself in doing it. For Hegel, this implies the necessity for a fundamental reorientation and redefinition of philosophising, involving an assimilation into its mode of argument an understanding of its own "situatedness" in relation to its object. Each subsequent thinker addressed in Chapter 2 is presented as confronting the previous one, in a way which emphasises that his failings derive from an improper or incomplete understanding of the extent to which his arguments

are defined by a wrong conception of the "situatedness" of his thinking. For Marx, for example, Hegel misunderstands the impact of material reality on his thinking. Lukács criticises Marx's "inversion" of Hegel, but from Adorno's perspective, does not go far enough in emphasising the significance of reason. Both Marx and Lukács ultimately imply the impossibility of philosophy and the inadequacy of critical thinking in general, and while their suspicion of philosophy is pervasive in Adorno's thought, he understands that to continue doing philosophy also means giving reason systematic relevance. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how Adorno adopts Lukács' basic insight that the power of capitalism derives from its capacity to represent the world. This idea informs Adorno's understanding of his own situatedness in writing *Aesthetic Theory*, an understanding which is partially responsible for the shape *Aesthetic Theory* takes. For reading "mimesis" in *Aesthetic Theory*, this means we must understand "mimesis" as mediated by capitalism, but potentially at least, capable of transcending it.

As Hohendahl has noted, the different kinds of expertise a reader brings to Adorno will tend to predispose the direction that critique will take, and the aspects of Adorno's oeuvre which appear as most significant.[35] If Chapter 2 tends to emphasise the significance of Marx and Lukács, and the extent to which Adorno understands philosophy as socially mediated, Chapter 3, looks at the background for understanding the relation between art and philosophy in *Aesthetic Theory*. From this perspective, Heidegger is far more important than Marx and Lukács. Heidegger's significance is multifaceted. Like Adorno, for Heidegger philosophy verges on an impossibility and, at various moments Heidegger, like Adorno, appears completely preoccupied by the problem of philosophical presentation. Despite many

[35] See Peter Hohendahl, P. *Prismatic Thought: Theodor W. Adorno*, (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 1995), pp. 7-8. The author emphasizes the significance of Adorno's critique of Heidegger in the first part of *Negative Dialectics* for poststrucuralist readings of Adorno. In contrast, he says "intellectual historians such as Martin Jay and Eugene Lunn emphasized the Hegelian tradition in the work of the Frankfurt School". p. 8.

basic similarities, Adorno and Heidegger are very different, especially in their appreciation of the nature and significance of philosophical form. Here Heidegger's impact on *Aesthetic Theory* is both direct and indirect. It is direct in that one of Adorno's most extended discussions of philosophical form is his critique of Heidegger in the first part of *Negative Dialectics*. The arguments Adorno develops here are very useful as a basis for explaining how Adorno differentiates philosophical form from the form of art. Heidegger's indirect impact derives from his influence on deconstruction, especially Derrida. Deconstruction might be said to be exclusively preoccupied with philosophical form. It has largely established the terms on which philosophical form can be understood as, in very general terms, "literary". Heidegger and Derrida both develop ideas of "mimesis" which often seem so close to Adorno as to be indistinguishable, but while the critical ambience Heidegger and Derrida operate within, is very suggestive for reading *Aesthetic Theory*, it is also intensely misleading. The form *Aesthetic Theory* takes is predicated on the distinctness of philosophical and literary form. For Heidegger and Derrida, however, any discussion of mimesis emerges from the premise that philosophical and literary form are indistinguishable. It is only as philosophical form that *Aesthetic Theory* can be understood as a "mimetic" work.

Having established the grounds for doing so in Chapters 2 and 3, Chapter 4 considers the extent to which *Aesthetic Theory* can be thought of as a work of philosophical mimesis. It looks at the call for the transformation of aesthetics in the Draft Introduction, and compares *Aesthetic Theory* with aspects of Hegel's *Aesthetics*, particularly Hegel's idea of "the concrete" as the context for the production and reception of art. The chapter concludes with a discussion of what it means to understand *Aesthetic Theory* as arguing for, and exemplifying, the mutual dependence of mimetic philosophy and mimetic art.

It is then possible to read "mimesis" at the different levels of its appearance in parts of *Aesthetic Theory*. Chapter 5 looks at the beginning of Chapter 10 of *Aesthetic Theory* to consider "mimesis" as it emerges in his discussion of the "artefactuality" of art. Chapter 6 looks at chapters 4, 5, and 6 of *Aesthetic Theory* in some detail, explaining Adorno's theory of mimesis in art and the relation of art's "mimetic" capacity to the beautiful in nature and to philosophy.

Chapter 7 considers these arguments first in relation to Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*. The systematic unity of Gombrich's work is revealed and explained as inseparable from his analysis of representational art. *Aesthetic Theory* can be read is an equally integrated exposition of "mimesis" in non-representational art. The comparison of *Art and Illusion* with *Aesthetic Theory* serves to emphasise the mutually incompatible ideas of art developed in each work. At the same time, Gombrich's understanding of the significance of the moment of production of art and the tension within the individual representational act between conventions of representation and the object represented, remain pivotal for *Aesthetic Theory*. In a sense, *Aesthetic Theory* can be read as a thoroughgoing "inversion" of *Art and Illusion*. This happens when the philosophical premises of *Art and Illusion* and its object, *qua* representational art, are undermined.

Other similarities between *Aesthetic Theory* and art history are considered in the second half of Chapter 7. The implications for reading *Aesthetic Theory* as art history are explored in the light of the transformation of aesthetics demanded in the Draft Introduction to *Aesthetic Theory*, and put into practise in subsequent chapters. It is argued that aspects of *Aesthetic Theory* are better read as part of an art historical debate about modernism and postmodernism, than as part of a tradition of philosophical aesthetics. While this is a useful re-contextualization of *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno's position within the debate about

modernism is unfamiliar. An indication of the difficulty is that theories of modernism are, almost without exception, justifications of art in the light of its rejection of "mimesis". Although he is certainly a defender of modernism, Adorno's constant emphasis on modernism as representing an absolute crisis for art (which is its significance), is quite at odds with ideas of modern art which emphasise its continuities with the past.

Chapter I

READING/APPROPRIATING *AESTHETIC THEORY*

Degrees of difficulty

The most pressing problem with reading and writing about *Aesthetic Theory* is how to begin; the most concrete experience of preliminary attempts to understand its arguments is the impression of the work's impenetrability. To a degree, this is a function of the difficulty of the text itself, equally; the particular background and expectations of the reader will have a role in determining how it is understood. On both counts, when we attempt to go further than a superficial acquaintance with the work, the need to develop a more directed strategy for reading becomes urgent. A prerequisite for this strategy would be to propose parameters for establishing how the responsibilities for the meaning of the work devolve. How far can or should the reader go in assimilating himself to Adorno's way of thinking? How far should this possibility be resisted in the name of critical distance?

These are familiar problems for any critical reading. What gives them more than abstract importance here is that Adorno's writing in general, and *Aesthetic Theory* in particular, is put together in a way that raises the reader's consciousness of the various mechanisms that generate meaning in the production and reception of the work. *Aesthetic Theory* is pervaded by an intrusive authorial presence, manifesting itself through a polemical turn of phrase, repetition, or the disjointed structure of an argument. The effect of these interruptions is to make a straight-forward concentration on content, necessary in reading more traditional philosophy, problematic. As a consequence, what we would traditionally think of as the content of the argument is sometimes obscured or withheld, with the effect that the meaning of certain passages comes to be perceived by the reader as indeterminate. In

this situation, the act of reading, which is always an act of 'making sense', is made conscious of itself as such; meaning is experienced as being generated, rather than completed by reading.

It is one consequence of Adorno's obvious preoccupation with the production and reception of meaning - as it pertains to his own work as well as a focus of interest within it - that critiques of his work rarely fail to acknowledge the problem of reading at some level. In their "Editor's Epilogue" to *Aesthetic Theory* Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedmann admit "The form of presentation of *Aesthetic Theory* will no doubt stand in the way of its appropriation".[1] Added to problems of the text, despite and because of its presentation, is the incompletion of the work at the author's death. The editors describe it as a "torso" - not an entirely apt metaphor, since they also quote one of Adorno's letters, written shortly before his death, as saying that *Aesthetic Theory* was "all there" and any changes would be "organisational rather than substantive".[2]

Given such complications, any reading of *Aesthetic Theory* which made absolute claims for its truth value would have to explain the difficulty of its argument in such a way that that difficulty did not emerge as an obstacle to grasping the meaning of *Aesthetic Theory*. This approach would have to present the difficulty of Adorno's argument as something to be transcended, either through rigorous reading/translation, or by describing it as having some specific purpose as form or structure. I argued in the Introduction that this kind of single-minded attitude towards defining the truth of Adorno's argument may well be predetermined to misrepresent it. In this chapter I contend that the difficulty of *Aesthetic Theory* is not reducible to a single factor; it cannot therefore be thought of as a uniform phenomenon which might be susceptible to a uniform way of reading. Accordingly, the

[1] Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedmann "Editors' Epilogue", in T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C.Lenhardt, (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1984), p. 496.
[2] Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedmann "Editors' Epilogue", in *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 493.

chapter is divided into sections, each of which gives a different explanation for the difficulty of *Aesthetic Theory*. In the last part, I suggest ways of reading the work that allow for the possibility that its argument might not be reducible to a consistent order of explanation.

Inherited difficulty

Some of the problems associated with reading *Aesthetic Theory* are inherited from the innate obscurity of the tradition of German philosophy of which it is a part. Furthermore, the aesthetic writings of this tradition, specifically Kant's *Critique of Judgement* and Hegel's *Aesthetics* (the two philosophical works Adorno most self-consciously confronts in *Aesthetic Theory*), are themselves as legendary for their ambiguities as for what they say with clarity. As Patrick Gardiner puts it, "...both [Kant's *Critique of Judgement* and Hegel's ***Aesthetics***]...are structurally complex, frequently obscure, and notoriously susceptible to wide varieties of interpretation".[3] Significantly, both identify the aesthetic itself as a radically problematic object for philosophy; its ambiguity is a necessary, even defining condition.

Above and beyond the complexities arising from such a complicated inheritance, *Aesthetic Theory* remains obscure, even by the standards of its great predecessors. Part of the problem here is simply a matter of context. Irrespective of the merits of the aesthetic writings of Kant and Hegel, the status of these two giants in the history of philosophy ensures that their contributions to that history, even if disputed, are widely summarised. Robert Pippin has described Hegel as being "in the impossible position of being both extraordinarily influential

[3] Patrick Gardiner, "Kant and Hegel on Aesthetics", in Stephen Priest (ed.), *Hegel's Critique of Kant*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press,1987), p. 162.

and almost completely inaccessible".[4] Adorno himself, making a similar point, writes of Hegel:

> In the realm of great philosophy Hegel is no doubt the only one with whom at times one literally does not know and cannot conclusively determine what is being talked about, and with whom there is no guarantee that such a judgement is even possible.[5]

Despite Hegel's complexity, the history of his reception has digested aspects of his argument. Likewise, the cornerstones of Kant's position are widely known. The reader of *Aesthetic Theory*, by contrast, is far less likely to have any such prior knowledge of Adorno's position. Certainly the recentness of Adorno's contribution to philosophy has something to do with this; *Aesthetic Theory* was first published in 1969 and only translated into English in 1984. More realistically, however, Adorno is simply not as generally an important thinker as Kant and Hegel; his philosophy will never have the same strategic importance. These very obvious facts have some bearing on why *Aesthetic Theory* seems arcane.

'Genetic' difficulty

Beyond the historical and strategic disparity between Adorno and his great predecessors, is a more subtle difference. Kant and Hegel both place enormous emphasis on achieving the greatest possible clarity in defining the beginning of their philosophical projects. Kant's whole enterprise is sometimes described as an attempt to define a beginning for philosophy; the status of the transcendental argument in his project is an indication of this central preoccupation. Hegel is obsessed with the same problem. The *Science of Logic* opens with the sentence:

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[4] Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1989), p. 3.
[5] Theodor Adorno, "Skoteinos, or How to Read Hegel" in T.W.Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1993), p. 89.

> It is only in recent times that thinkers have become aware of the difficulty of finding a beginning in philosophy, and the reason for this difficulty and also the possibility of resolving it has been much discussed.[6]

For Kant and Hegel, the emphasis on a clear beginning derives from the self-consciously asserted demand, and methodological prerequisite, that they base their philosophical projects on some kind of foundational truth. As a direct result, both philosophers spend a great deal of time explaining their points of departure. Having introduced their projects, the works which follow generally hold together and complement each other so that, for example, it has been argued that Kant's three critiques form a unity in the direction of their argument. Likewise, Hegel conceives of his project as a system of component parts, and even specifies that the *Phenomenology* should be read as an introduction to the system.

Adorno's *oeuvre* is quite different. There is no obvious point of entry into his thought, and he never gives a clear account of his basic assumptions. Even his status as a philosopher can be questioned. The form and content of his writings are varied, ranging from the aphorisms of *Minima Moralia*, to the essays of *Prisms* and *Notes to Literature*, to the more specialised works on musical theory and criticism. Adorno's most obviously philosophical works are *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory*. However, his programmatic hostility to the idea of attempting to establish secure assumptions on which to construct his position means even these works do not have obvious beginnings, and therefore do not read logically.

Such 'non-philosophical' characteristics of his writing are obviously not unique to Adorno. Much of post-Nietzschean Continental philosophy shares a common preoccupation with the problem of how to present itself. This dilemma is a direct result of its perception of the impossibility of defining a starting point for its own activity. The question inevitably arises of how it might be possible to start a philosophical argument in the absence of the *idea* of a

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[6] G.W.F.Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller, (New York: George Allen & Unwin, 1969), p. 67.

beginning? Without a beginning, how is it possible to think of a middle and an end? The crisis in confidence, which precipitates the unravelling of traditionally unproblematic philosophical form, is reflected in the crisis of philosophy as a discipline. If it no longer feels able to confront its traditionally conceived function of defining the most general principles and causes of things, then what is its role? The situation has prompted one contemporary Continental 'philosopher' to ask: "...how could it be other than derisory today to claim still to be engaging in philosophy or - worse - to proclaim oneself a philosopher?"[7] As part of this broad reaction against the problems and form of traditional philosophy, it is not surprising to find Adorno writing of *Aesthetic Theory* in the following terms:

> My theorem that there is no philosophical "first thing" is coming back to haunt me. Much as I might be tempted, I cannot now proceed to construct a universe in the usual orderly fashion. Instead I have to put together a whole from a series of partial complexes which are concentrically arranged and have the same weight and relevance.[8]

To amplify the implications of this point it is useful to contrast the fabric of Hegel's and Adorno's writing. The 'structure' of their respective arguments reflect their author's different motives and conceptions of what doing philosophy involves.

An identifying characteristic of Hegel's argument is its teleological and cumulative structure. This is to say, to grasp his strategy it is necessary to follow a developing train of thought. If Hegel makes a statement which assumes a degree of foreknowledge, that knowledge will have been provided at an earlier stage in the argument. Put another way, Hegel's claims often seem to have two levels of meaning: a sentence in Hegel has both an immediate meaning which is tied to the description of a specific situation, such as, for example, his famous discussion of the French Revolution in the *Phenomenology*. At the same time, the discussion is additionally *meaningful* as a result of its special function within the

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[7] Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art and Politics: The Fiction of the Political*, trans. Chris Turner, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 1.
[8] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 496.

context of Hegel's strategy as a whole. This seems an obvious claim to make for any text, but what is important, and unique about Hegel's argument, is the claim that both levels of meaning are mutually defining. Such unity is achieved because, according to Hegel, the logic of the grand dialectical process of history is identical with movements of minute and exhaustive detail which drive it. In Hegel, everything is meaningful because it exists within a unified and coherent universe.

Adorno's mode of argument is similarly loaded but, unlike Hegel, Adorno does not argue in such a way as to give derivations explaining the genesis and development of a thought. This essential difference between Hegel and Adorno can perhaps be summarised by a trite but telling analogy. If Hegel's argument is compared to an onion, then each particular claim can be likened to a layer of flesh, which both envelops the previous claim and depends on it for its structural stability. In the Preface to *The Phenomenology* he writes: "[philosophy] is the process which begets and transcends its own moments"; every claim is made meaningful by its function within the system.[9] Adorno's argument, by contrast, cannot be likened to a concrete object. Although it has a similar depth and rigour, that rigour is less evident since it cannot be traced to a stable centre or closed system, because, and this is where Adorno differs fundamentally from Hegel, for him there isn't one.

What this comparison with Hegel seeks to underline, is that the difficulty of *Aesthetic Theory* might be thought of as generated by the problems Adorno encounters in trying to do philosophy, having rejected the possibility of grounding that argument. The difficulty of *Aesthetic Theory* then, I contend, is different from that generated in the aestheticisation of philosophical discourse, often associated with Nietzsche, or the late Heidegger. I will return in greater detail to Adorno's critique of Heidegger in Chapter 3, but some indication of the issues at stake can be signalled in advance. For example, in Heidegger's *The Origin of the*

[9] G.W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V.Miller, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 27.

Work of Art, the literary or poetic style is conceived of as philosophically meaningful in itself, insofar as Heidegger considers the presumption of a potentially adequate correspondence between concept and object implicit in the traditional philosophical judgement to be *the* obstacle to its success. By trying to eliminate philosophical reflection, Heidegger aims to by-pass what, for him, is the self-defeating distance of rational thinking from its object. For Heidegger, such reflection is problematic because it is a force which breaks up the very unity presupposed by traditional philosophical activity as its end. Adorno's well-known antipathy towards Heidegger derives in no small measure from the closeness of their arguments at this level. He shares Heidegger's hostility to the idea of the sufficiency of reason, but unlike Heidegger, he does not abandon reason. For Adorno, this would imply the impossibility of any form of critical judgement: philosophical, aesthetic, moral or ethical. Rather, the problem Adorno engages in his work can be framed as a continuing attempt to answer/demonstrate what it might mean to do philosophy in the understanding that philosophy is insufficiently equipped to resolve the problems which define it. Habermas has spoken of the "grandeur of Adorno's consistency" in the pursuit of this "philosophical impulse".[10] Habermas made this comment in a critical discussion of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, but, and it might seem odd to claim this, in an abstract, and therefore potentially misleading sense, the word "consistent" is apt in describing *Aesthetic Theory*. It can be read as an attempt to answer or demonstrate what it might be to write critically and rationally on art and aesthetic experience, while understanding the impossibility of doing so in a satisfactory way. This is to alter slightly the terms of the discussion of *Aesthetic Theory* as 'groundless', in the sense that this description applies to an idea Adorno had about all his work. It specially emphasises the particular problem, self-consciously grounded or not, which philosophy has when trying to describe art

[10] Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. F.Lawrence, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1987), p. 120.

and aesthetic experience. Indeed, the historical difficulty or insolubility of the problems of aesthetics is a large part of what makes aesthetics so important to Adorno in the light of his general position about the necessity for a groundless philosophy. In *Aesthetic Theory* the difficult problem and the difficult way of confronting it 'complement' one another. As Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedeman say in their Editors Epilogue to *Aesthetic Theory*:

> Adorno...knew that aesthetics demands a solution to a problem which cannot be delivered in the medium of theory. What validity aesthetic theory has is predicated on the philosopher's dogged determination not to give up in the face of an insoluble dilemma. This paradox might be a good model for the appropriation of this work, too. In the last analysis the obstacles to any kind of direct approach (póros) to the text of *Aesthetic Theory* are objective. They would not have been entirely eliminated, no matter how conscientiously Adorno revised the existing text.[11]

In other words, Habermas is right about the consistency of Adorno's philosophical purpose, but this does not produce consistent philosophical results. One of the implications of not grounding a philosophical argument is that your method can no longer be a consistent organising force within it. In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno's method 'mutates' in response to the different kinds of question being confronted.

Having said this, it would be wrong to read *Aesthetic Theory* purely as though its difficulty were a consequence of the way Adorno confronts an insoluble problem. This would be to imply that *Aesthetic Theory* is an 'organic' work, whose genetic imprint defines the way its argument evolved. The difficulty of *Aesthetic Theory* is not purely a consequence of spontaneous generation; we need to understand it, at least to some degree, as a deliberately manufactured afterthought. This attitude to Adorno's argument is highlighted particularly clearly in Popper's approach toward reading him.

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[11] Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedeman, "Editors' epilogue" in *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 497.

Difficulty as 'afterthought' or, Popper reading Adorno[12]

Popper, one of Adorno's least sympathetic critics, did more than most to propagate Adorno's image as a gratuitously difficult author. As Jay has remarked, Popper accused him of "talking trivialities in high sounding language".[13] To make the point, Popper analyzed a section of the text of Adorno's argument. Taking it through a series of progressively simplifying stages, Popper performed what might be described as a filtering process. Using three columns, he juxtaposed Adorno's original German, a paraphrase into simple German of what seemed to have been asserted, and a translation of that paraphrase into English.[14] There is something to be said for the rigor of Popper's method, but its dissecting close focus, even were it not motivated by an overt hostility towards Adorno's work, makes certain assumptions about the nature of philosophical expression that are incompatible with Adorno's broad theoretical aspirations.

Implicit in Popper's close textual analysis is the assumption that his and Adorno's work take place within an all-encompassing continuity of meaning. Furthermore, this is a continuity that overrides any differences between them. In other words, Popper assumes he and Adorno are playing the same game. With this implicit assumption, the premises of Popper's interpretative enterprise are calibrated against a universal standard of clarity, whose authority he takes to be so obvious as to be unquestionable. That standard is the apparently reasonable demand that an author state his thoughts "simply, clearly and modestly, rather than impressively."[15] As a consequence, there is no possibility in Popper's interpretation that the meaning of Adorno's text is anything other than defined by its author's use of language,

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[12] For an analysis of the relation between Popper and Adorno emphasisizing their similarities, see Robert D'Amico,"Popper and the Frankfurt School", *Telos* 86 (Winter 1990-91), pp. 33-49.
[13] Martin Jay, *Adorno*, (London: Fontana, 1984), p. 12.
[14] Karl Popper, "Reason or Revolution" in T.W. Adorno and others, *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, trans. Glyn Adey and David Frisby, (London: Heinemann, 1976), pp. 296-97.
[15] T.W. Adorno and others, *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, p. 297.

grammar and syntax. The meaning of Adorno's argument is Adorno's responsibility. His difficult style of writing represents, for Popper, a gratuitous refusal to engage directly with matters of substance. With this conclusion in mind, Popper sees it as the function of his critical reading to discern what Adorno 'really' wanted to say. He can then proceed to reshape what is actually written, in terms that make more obvious sense. Accordingly, Popper proceeds with his distillation of Adorno's writing; coming to terms with the text by seeking to eliminate its difficulty.

Adorno's perspective on the matter is, needless to say, quite different. During his long-running dispute with Popper he suggests that:

> ...the cognitive ideal of the consistent, preferably simple, mathematically elegant explanation falls down where reality itself, society, is neither consistent, nor simple, nor neutrally left to the discretion of the categorical formulation.[16]

In the light of this statement, and others like it throughout Adorno's *oeuvre*, Popper's mandatory clarity is actively resisted by Adorno. Without considering the rights or wrongs of either position, it is fairly obvious that Popper and Adorno have incompatible understandings of the significance of the difficulty of Adorno's work. This incompatibility registers where Popper's interpretative method meets Adorno's text. Irrespective of particular interpretative decisions Popper makes about Adorno's work, the mechanism of Popper's interpretative method, and his expectations for it, already define the parameters within which he can understand the meaning of Adorno's work to take place. For Popper, the difficulty of Adorno's argument is an obstacle that needs to be overcome. For Adorno, it is part of the meaning of his work ***qua*** an obstacle to clear understanding.

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[16]T.W. Adorno, "On the Logic of the Social Sciences" in *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, p. 106.

It seems that this idea of deliberately thwarting easy reception was important to Adorno as he was working on *Aesthetic Theory*. One of the letters he wrote while working on it says that the work was written in two drafts, each of which was quite different:

> ...The second draft for me is always the decisive one, whereas the first merely serves to assemble raw materials...The first draft is always an organised self-deception; in the second I manoeuvre myself into the position of critic of my own work. This I find most productive.[17]

This account of the genesis of the work, together with pronouncements on the nature of philosophical argument in *Negative Dialectics* and "The Essay as Form", suggest that the "self-deception" of the first draft was precisely that it was too "clear". The second phase of writing is therefore a critique and necessary "abstraction" of the first. The word "abstraction" is important in this context. In philosophy it denotes the distance which exists between a philosophical concept and the object it describes. Equally, in this context it also denotes the re-emphasis of this distance and an attempt to thematise it against any attempt or temptation by the writer or reader to forget its inevitability. From this perspective of its difficulty, *Aesthetic Theory* is doubly abstract first, as a philosophical text, and second, as text which seeks to emphasise the inevitable distance of a philosophical argument from the possibility of establishing a secure truth.[18]

The difficulty of *Aesthetic Theory*, from this perspective, is precisely to counter the putative transparency of traditional philosophical argument. It aims to cloud that transparency to make the reader aware of the contingencies involved in making sense of the text. In "The Essay as Form" Adorno argues that the essay is a particularly suitable medium for the presentation of thought since its ephemeral form emphasises the contingency of its

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[17] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 495.

[18] This way of thinking about *Aesthetic Theory* is further born out by the draft version of the "Introduction" which escaped the second phase of composition and was to have been rejected by the author from the final edition. The draft Introduction is a lucid account of the aims of the work as they relate to the tradition of philosophical aesthetics, and is therefore useful for contextualising *Aesthetic Theory* vis-a-vis that tradition.

content.[19] *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory* however, are both over four hundred pages long and, according to Adorno, represent "the quintessence of my thought".[20] They are, in contrast to his essays, substantial works. What has not changed for the author, however, is their contingent relation to what they describe. Adorno must therefore develop some way of maintaining an awareness of such contingency in this context. From this perspective then, the difficulty of *Aesthetic Theory* is fundamentally reflexive, aiming to draw attention to the contingency of its truth claims, but it is still making truth claims and expects and demands rigorous critique and evaluation. Put another way, the opacity of *Aesthetic Theory* is defined by the possibility of clear meaning; we only experience the work's opacity as a contrast to the possibility of transparently clear meaning and vice-versa.

Returning briefly to the concrete act of reading *Aesthetic Theory*, how should we now think of our experience of the work? To define its difficulty as purely 'inherited', 'genetic', or deliberately disruptive would be misguided. One strategy of reading which suggests itself is to do the opposite of Popper, accept the difficulty of *Aesthetic Theory* as a *fait accompli*, and understand the obscurity as testimony to the radical indeterminacy of the issues he tries to discuss. In practice, in moments of indulgence towards Adorno (and ourselves as readers), this may be the best, even the only, policy. In this sense we can understand the difficulty of *Aesthetic Theory* as Adorno's insurance policy against the possibility of a definitive reading of a work which seeks to give expression to the radical indeterminacy of the object of its interest, rather than simply describe it as such. There are two problems with this attitude. First, as Adorno makes very clear in his critique of Heidegger in Part 1 of *Negative Dialectics*, the indeterminacy of Heidegger's thinking is the focus of much of his hostility to Heidegger. In other words, to read the difficulty of *Aesthetic Theory* as indeterminacy which

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[19] See T.W.Adorno, *Notes to Literature Vol 1*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, (New York: Columbia University Press,1991), pp. 3-24.
[20] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 493.

testifies to the indeterminacy of its objects, is to see Adorno in the light of what he sees most wrong with Heidegger. So, while 'reading' *Aesthetic Theory* like this may, at times, be no bad thing, we need to keep in mind that indeterminacy in philosophical argument is something which Adorno actively resists and considers to be a symptom of the failure of philosophical thinking. The second problem with identifying the difficulty of *Aesthetic Theory* with indeterminacy is that, while it may give credit to the idea of the significance of difficulty in itself, rather than simply as an obstacle to clarity, it makes no commitment to establishing a critically informed understanding of that difficulty in terms other than of its contrast with what is clearly understood.

The following section, therefore, looks at the difficulty of *Aesthetic Theory* as a function of the idea of "ideology critique" which, like the earlier discussion of difficulty as 'genetic', places emphasis on understanding why *Aesthetic Theory* is hard to read because of what Adorno is trying to do, rather than as a negative image of clarity. The discussion of 'genetic' difficulty concentrated on the way the refusal to establish a beginning for philosophical argument impacted on its organization. The difficulty generated by "ideology critique" is related, but concentrates more on the detail of Adorno's argument and the tendency not to define particular concepts.

Difficulty and "ideology critique"

One of the most potentially dangerous, but appealing, possibilities is to look to Adorno as a reader for clues about how to read his own work. We might be able to use Adorno against himself to judge how his argument lives up to his own aspirations for it. Or, by looking at his critiques of other theorists, we might gain some idea of how he demarcates his own practice in relation to theirs. Having said this, Adorno's *oeuvre* addresses the

problem of reading at different levels. It is therefore impossible to develop a uniform strategy to confront all its constituent elements. Nonetheless, different parts of his *oeuvre* potentially illuminate one another. *Aesthetic Theory* clearly demands a different kind of attention than, say, the letter in which Adorno criticizes aspects of the draft version of Benjamin's *Arcades Project.* At the same time, Adorno's critique of Benjamin is potentially illuminating of Adorno's own way of working in an unexpected way. This is because Habermas, among others has argued that one of the flaws in Adorno's reading of Benjamin is that he tends to see Benjamin as trying and failing to address precisely the same problems which exercise him: "Adorno never noticeably hesitated to attribute to Benjamin the precise intention of Ideology critique that he followed in his own work, and in this he was wrong".[21]

At this point the interest is not in the rights and wrongs of the notorious editorial dispute between Benjamin and Adorno over Benjamin's *Arcades Project.* Rather, what is of interest is the way Adorno's critique of Benjamin reflects back onto how his own procedures of constructing an argument might be construed as attempting to get round the problems he finds in Benjamin. I will concentrate on Adorno's critique of Benjamin's essay 'Paris - Capital of the nineteenth-century'.[22] Benjamin's essay is divided into six titled and numbered sections. Adorno singles out for special attention a motto which divides the first section: "*Chaque époque reve la suivante* [Every Epoch Dreams its Successor]" and Benjamin's ensuing exposition of what it means.[23]

Immediately following the motto, Benjamin claims there are "correspondences" between nineteenth-century means of production and "images in the collective

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[21] See particularly Jürgen Habermas "Consciousness Raising or Rescuing Critique" in Gary Smith (ed.), *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1991), p. 115.
[22] see W. Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. H.Zorn, (London: Verso, 1983), p. 157-60.
[23] For Adorno's critique of Benjamin see T.W. Adorno "Letter to Walter Benjamin, 2 August, 1935" in R.Taylor (ed.), *Aesthetics and Politics*, (London: Verso, 1980), pp. 110-120.

consciousness". This correspondence takes the form of a theme shared by both: a "mingling of the old and the new". The 'shape' the economic half of this correspondence takes is that new means of production are still dominated by old means of production, because these have not yet been completely transformed by capitalism. In the collective consciousness, the mingling of old and new expresses itself in the aspiration to transcend its own social deficiencies. Such desire for a better society emerges, according to Benjamin, as the "vigorous aspiration to break with what is out-dated - which means, however, with the most recent past." He continues,

> These tendencies [in the collective consciousness] turn the fantasy, which gains its initial stimulus from the new, back upon the primal past. In the dream in which every epoch sees in images the epoch which is to succeed it, the latter appears coupled with elements of prehistory - that is to say of a classless society.[24]

So, the desire for a better present comes to be a dream for a better future, which is itself associated with the idea of a prelapsarian classless society. Benjamin then goes on to say that the pattern of this aspiration in the collective consciousness leaves material traces in "in a thousand configurations of life, from permanent buildings to ephemeral fashions."[25] This last claim reflects back on the first part of the section, before the motto, where Benjamin discussed the emergence of the arcades, using the same kind of argument:

> The beginnings of construction in iron constituted the second condition for the appearance of the arcades. The Empire had seen in this technique a contribution to the renewal of architecture in the sense of ancient Greece. The architectural theorist Bötticher expressed the general conviction when he said that 'with regard to the art-forms of the new system, the formal principle of the Hellenic mode' must come into force.[26]

In other words, the architectural construction of the arcades themselves expresses the same "dialectical image" of the new and the old. Here the "dialectical image" takes the shape

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[24] W. Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, p. 159.
[25] W. Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, p. 159.
[26] W. Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, p. 158.

of a coalescence of the design principles of the architecture of ancient Greece with the new material of iron.

There is an elegant simplicity to Benjamin's argument. He takes the idea of the commodity as fetish and, extends this "dialectical image" to the structure of collective consciousness, and the products of early nineteenth-century Paris. Adorno begins with three specific criticisms. He faults Benjamin's

> ... conception of the dialectical image as the content of consciousness, all be it a collective one; its direct - I would almost say: developmental -relatedness to the future as Utopia; and the notion of the 'epoch' as proper, and self contained subject.[27]

Although Adorno seems to be concentrating on detail, his procedure is to demonstrate systematically that the central ideas of Benjamin's argument are far more complex than Benjamin acknowledges. The result of Adorno's critique is to nullify the simplicity of Benjamin's argument, both at the level of the concepts it relies on and its organization. Adorno's first target is what he sees as Benjamin's claim that "the dialectical image is the content of consciousness". This would be to imply that the collective consciousness of the nineteenth-century, of which Benjamin speaks, has a realistic replication of a latent tension between the old and the new, implicit in the commodity fetish. Against this Adorno argues,

> The fetish character of the commodity is not a fact of consciousness; rather, it is dialectical, in the eminent sense that it produces consciousness. This means, however, that consciousness or unconsciousness cannot simply depict it as a dream, but responds to it in equal measure with desire and fear. But it is precisely this dialectical power that is lost in the replica realism in your present immanent version of the dialectical image.[28]

Here Adorno is deploying against Benjamin an argument first forwarded by Lukács in the essay "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat." In an argument which will be developed in more detail in Chapter 2, Lukács argues that the commodity form qualitatively changes the way we experience the world, not just what we think about. Adorno

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[27] T.W. Adorno "Letter to Walter Benjamin, 2 August, 1935", p. 111.
[28] T.W.Adorno, "Letter to Walter Benjamin. 2 August, 1935", p. 111.

is similarly highly critical of the implication that the commodity fetish seems to be tied to the idea of utopia. According to Adorno's critique, in Benjamin's argument there is an erroneous translation of the dialectical image of the commodity fetish onto the collective consciousness because the utopia promised by the commodity fetish is not the same as a social utopia: "We receive the promise of immortality in commodities and not for people".[29].

One way to situate Adorno's critique of Benjamin is to consider it in the light of Habermas' description of the central importance of the idea of "ideology critique" to Adorno's theoretical identity. Habermas definition of it as a method of critical procedure is particularly illuminating when applied to Adorno's reading of Benjamin:

> Critique becomes ideology critique when it attempts to show that the validity of a theory has not been adequately dissociated from the context from which it emerged; that behind the back of the theory there lies an inadmissible *mixture of power and validity*, and that it owes its reputation to this. Ideology critique wants to show how, on the level for which this painstaking distinction between contexts of meaning and contexts of reality is constitutive, precisely these internal and external relationships are confused - and they are confused because validity claims are confused because of relationships of power. Ideology critique itself is not a theory competing with some other theory; it simply makes use of certain theoretical assumptions. Thus equipped, it *disputes* the *truth* of a suspicious theory by *exposing its untruthfulness*. It advances the process of enlightenment by showing that a theory presupposing a demythologized understanding of the world is still ensnared by myth, by pointing out a putatively overcome category mistake.[30]

It is what he sees as the inadequacy of Benjamin's strategic position 'behind' the text, and the dependence of the detail on that position, of which Adorno is critical. In simple terms, Adorno considers Benjamin's position too obviously divided into a set of theoretical assumptions, on the one hand, and a series of statements derived from them, on the other. In Benjamin's case, this consists of seeing reality as explainable through various extrapolations of the dialectical image of the commodity fetish. Benjamin derives from the 'truth' of the commodity fetish, certain 'facts'. For Benjamin, the dialectical image recurs as a variety of concrete manifestations. For Adorno, dialectical images are "objective constellations in which

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[29] T.W.Adorno, "Letter to Walter Benjamin. 2 August, 1935",p. 114.
[30] Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*,p. 116.

the 'social' situation represents itself. Consequently, no ideological or social 'accomplishment' can ever be expected of a dialectical image."[31] In other words, for Adorno, a "dialectical image" is something which is consciously a critical motif that recognizes and exposes symptoms of the social situation. It is not some structural rule which, as Benjamin seems to imply, functions to organize and unify the relations between the commodity form, collective consciousness, and the design of the arcades.

As Habermas says, ideology critique is not a competing theory. Adorno does not have a different understanding of the Parisian arcades, rather, his critique of Benjamin focuses almost entirely on the erroneous assumptions Benjamin makes as revealed by his mode of argument. Benjamin does not understand that the economic motif of the commodity fetish cannot be simply uplifted into a social context without its own transformation. Equally, Benjamin's theory relies on the meaningful existence of a contained period of time implied by the word "epoch", without questioning whether the concept has any concrete existence.

Adorno is criticizing Benjamin whenever he sees the latter as relying on some 'truth', be it Marxism, or the presumption of the adequacy of a particular concept. Nothing is allowed to be taken for granted. On the face of it, this displaces Benjamin's argument away from its ostensible concerns of understanding Paris in terms of the dynamic of nineteenth-century capitalism, to problems of method. In a different context, Rainer Nägele has described what is going on here: "...Adorno unhinges that point on which all stories depend: the beginning whose arbitrariness is covered up by the fiction of a necessary and natural origin."[32] Benjamin's presumption of the truth of Marxism and the adequacy of the concepts he is using are both appeals to the idea of "necessary and natural origin" and although such

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[31] T.W.Adorno, 'Letter to Walter Benjamin. 2 August, 1935', pp. 115-116.
[32] RainerNägele, "The Scene of the Other: Theodor W. Adorno's Negative Dialectic in the context of Poststructuralism," *Boundary Two* 11 (1983), p.66.

presumptions permit a clear and convincing argument, this clarity occludes the appeal to fictional origins.

What might Adorno's critique of Benjamin imply for our understanding of the difficulty of *Aesthetic Theory*? First, we have seen that at its most basic, Adorno's ideology critique reveals the apparently simple to be infinitely complicated. Thus Habermas writes: "Ideology critique wants to show how, on the level for which this painstaking distinction between contexts of meaning and contexts of reality is constitutive, precisely these internal and external relations are confused." Adorno conceives of his task as making, and keeping clear, the *painstaking* distinction between the constitutive relation of the internal and external. In other words, to expect Adorno to give hard definitions of "beauty", "art", or "mimesis" is to overemphasize the constitutive power of the internal definition, and therefore misunderstand his central idea that it is the relation between the internal definition of a concept, and the circumstances of its deployment, that constitutes its meaning. In the practice of reading *Aesthetic Theory*, this means that Adorno has never said the last word about any particular concept; there is always something more to say. In the Introduction to *Against Epistemology* Adorno gives a clear indication of why this has to be so: "The doctrine that everything is mediated, even supporting immediacy, is irreconcilable with the urge to 'reduction' and is stigmatized as logical nonsense."[33] In this sense the difficulty of deriving hard definitions of concepts in *Aesthetic Theory* can be explained as reflecting a high degree of consistency between what Adorno believes philosophical argument can achieve, and what he actually does; to say that a concept is mediated means that it is infinitely definable. In one of the most pessimistic moments in *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno reaches a point of such detailed and minute complexity of mediations that he simply writes

[33] Adorno, T.W. *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique. Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies*, trans. Willis Domingo, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1983), pp. 4-5.

> Finally what becomes engulfed by this dialectical turbulence is the notion of meaning. Since a negative judgment must be passed on history, the unity of process and result is unattainable. increasingly, the individual moments refuse to accommodate themselves within a preconceived totality, opening a cleavage that destroys meaning.[34]

While this moment of failure can be read as signifying Adorno's honesty in admitting his inability to think any further in a particular train of thought, it might equally imply a devious evasiveness. Roger Taylor, the Editor/Translator of the collection of papers and correspondence in which the translation of Adorno's letter to Benjamin appears, takes the latter view, suggesting that this accounts for one of the most important differences between Benjamin and Adorno:

> If Benjamin in Paris was a too credulous believer in the thaumaturgical virtue of 'calling things by their names,' his colleagues in New York certainly did not suffer from any trusting literalism: they were becoming too adept practitioners of the diplomatic art of euphemism and periphrasis, that knowingly does not call things by their name.[35]

This is to read Adorno as thoroughly evasive because he wants to make ideology critique impossible by simply not making truth claims. This is actually quite wrong, as was suggested in an earlier discussion of Adorno's attitude to philosophical indeterminacy. All the same, the suggestion that Adorno practices, or tries to practice ideology critique on himself widens the terms of how we should be prepared to read the difficulty of *Aesthetic Theory*. The 're-writing' of his arguments must not be just thought of as deliberate attempt to make arguments less transparent, but as Adorno arguing against, even contradicting himself as a deliberate strategy. If this were the case, it would be imperative to attempt to critically differentiate between deliberate contradictions in Adorno's thought, and those contradictions which, as those Adorno sees in Benjamin, genuinely undermine an argument.

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[34] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 256.
[35] Ronald Taylor (ed.), *Aesthetics and Politics*, p. 106.

Difficulty as "mediated" argument

This kind of attitude towards developing a critical, but methodologically sensitive, reading of Adorno is suggested by Jay. In the short introductory work *Adorno*, he directly engages with the problem of trying to deal with Adorno in a way sympathetic to his own terms. In tune with the idea that Adorno explicitly energizes a dynamic relation between the difficulty of his argument and his wider theoretical aims, Jay writes in an often quoted sentence, "Adorno would have had a principled objection to render his thought painlessly accessible to a wide audience".[36] This statement certainly contests the adequacy of Popper's order of interpretative myopia, but Jay later dramatically reinforces the idea of the difficulty of Adorno by likening his writing to high modernist art:

> Like the music of Arthur Schoenburg, which, so Adorno approvingly claimed, demanded of the listener "not mere contemplation but praxis", his own writing was deliberately designed to thwart an effortless reception by passive readers.[37]

On the face of it, the emphasis here on the impossibility of "effortless reception" echoes Popper's critique. Despite very different attitudes to Adorno, both critics acknowledge the necessity for a particularly determined attitude to reading him. At the same time, their attention is directed differently, because their understanding of the potential significance of the difficulty of Adorno's work is different.

Ignoring the substance of Jay's claim for the moment, I want to concentrate on what it tells us about his critical approach, and how it differs from Popper's. Jay suggests a level of meaning beyond that which is possible within Popper's paradigm of clarity. One effect is to reveal the limitations of Popper's expectations for Adorno, and therefore attest to the inevitable inadequacy of his conclusions about Adorno's work. More significantly, Jay's suggestion arises out of a different order of critical behavior. To liken Adorno's texts to

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[36] Martin Jay, *Adorno*, p. 11.
[37] Martin Jay, *Adorno*, p. 11.

Schoenberg's music is by no means a reflexive critical act. That is to say, Jay's analogy is not something he could have brought to his reading of the work in the way Popper brought with him the demand for clarity. Instead of unreflectively applying given standards to Adorno's work, as Popper does, Jay implies a disposition towards the work wherein the reader first needs to make decisions about what those standards should be. This effectively adds a new dimension to the process of reading, throwing doubt on the principle that Popper, or anyone else, can make unreflective assumptions about the kind of thing Adorno's work is. With this in mind, it is worthwhile briefly reconsidering the question of what it means to be critical of Adorno's work.

In response to an understanding of the significance of Adorno's work as ideology critique, it was suggested that we need to be both critical and sympathetic towards the difficulty of *Aesthetic Theory*. This is a principal that sounds plausible, but remains aspirational, rather than a concrete way of reading which could be put into practice. Furthermore, from Popper's perspective it looks like a compromise, an uncritical softening of critical standards, to compensate for Adorno's idiosyncrasies. The response to this charge is twofold. First, Popper's argument is itself based on the uncritical assumption that the premises of his own position are absolute. Second, by opening these premises up for negotiation, the horizons of critical decision making are expanded, not removed. Unlike Popper, it is incumbent on us to make critical judgments about our expectations for Adorno's work. The judgments we make will define the limits of our reading, and therefore the range within which interpretative questions are asked of it. Without the certainties deriving from the anchored coordinates of Popper's interpretative universe, the relevance of these critical categories can only ever be provisional. They evolve from a negotiation with the text, rather than being blindly applied, or randomly plucked out of the air. To take a metaphor Panofsky

used to describe something like this kind of attitude, as it applied to his own interpretative enterprise: in order to derive productive contexts within which to understand Adorno's argument we need to "marinate" ourselves in his thought. Through time we can develop ideas of what to expect from *Aesthetic Theory*. These expectations are the contexts in which a detailed reading can take place.

Responding to the interpretative challenge something like this idea of Adorno's work presents, Jay identifies two themes from Adorno's critical vocabulary: the "force-field" and the "constellation" as signaling the hybrid nature of Adorno's writing. In a general sense, these ideas are expressive of principals reflecting Adorno's commitment to the notion that the analysis of any phenomenon must approach it simultaneously from different perspectives. Another way of putting this is to say that the ideas of the "force-field" and "constellation" register the importance of the principle of "mediation" for Adorno's project.

Within this model of Adorno's work, Jay signals five intersecting categories to guide his general reading. They are respectively: Western Marxism, aesthetic modernism, cultural conservatism, a "Jewish impulse", and deconstruction. He emphasizes these are not fixed categories, and, "...it would be possible to discern still subtler contesting impulses that would help us to get Adorno into better focus".[38] Notwithstanding this warning, the frames of reference he identifies are in fact relatively well-established as defining the major themes of Adorno's thought. This has the benefit of making them relatively uncontroversial, but they can also have the effect of limiting the reception of his work within those traditions. Equally important, the themes we identify as significant for understanding Adorno are necessary to help clarify his writing, but they can also function in reverse, integrating his work into particular traditions of debate whose agendas are not necessarily sympathetic to the promiscuous overlapping of Adorno's interests. Various critiques of Adorno's thought

[38] Martin jay, *Adorno*, p. 11.

described in the Introduction diagnosed his obsolescence as deriving from a particular weakness which, it was then asserted, undermined the whole of his project. The problem with this type of critique is not so much a question of its correctness, or otherwise, but of the tendency towards a compartmentalized reception of Adorno which neglects the integration of his thinking.

The significance of Jay's approach is the extent to which it understands Adorno's thought as a constellation of different interests. Jay himself is taking a global view of Adorno's thought, and recognizes that the mediating interests he identifies may be refined. I have suggested that this process of refining is partly about being open in one's expectations for Adorno's work. At the same time, the idea of refining our expectations from the general themes Jay diagnoses is also about understanding that the moments in the constellation of interests defining *Aesthetic Theory* are also mutually defining. Taking Jay's examples, this means that Western Marxism, deconstruction, etc. are not just influences on Adorno's thinking, but each is defined by the others; cultural conservatism is deconstructed, deconstruction is criticized from the perspective of Western Marxism, and so on. Irrespective of the outcomes of these confrontations within Adorno's work, their mutual modification signals one of the biggest problems in reading Adorno, which is the extent to which his work confuses disciplinary boundaries. An obvious frame of reference within which to read *Aesthetic Theory*, for example, is to see it as part of a tradition of philosophical aesthetics. Indeed it is, but it is also a strident articulation and defense of a way of thinking about modernism, an analysis of the cultural impact of capitalism, and a theory of representation. At times these agendas mutually reinforce each other within the work; at times they are in obvious, and unconcealed, contradiction.

Difficulty as the 'absence' of discipline

For a start, the argument Adorno uses in discussing the various subjects he engages is often driven by critical conventions which he extends beyond the traditions wherein they were originally developed. As a consequence, his writing is often a hybrid mixture of different kinds of "competence", applied over normally distinct fields. These include, for example, literary criticism, philosophy, Marxism, sociology, and aesthetics. Once we have identified various themes as significant within the work, the critical procedures we adopt to explore them are not neutral, they function in methodologically specific ways. For example, we have seen that Jay makes an analogy between the difficulty of Adorno's style of writing and the difficulty of modern art. Notwithstanding Adorno's hostility to the aestheticisation of philosophy, this is a particularly relevant observation when it comes to thinking about *Aesthetic Theory*. If, however, we read *Aesthetic Theory* seeking to explain its difficulty within the context of related problems arising out of a confrontation with modern art, then our discussion will inevitably carry with it something of the traditions of criticism and art historical debate. We might place emphasis on questions that are often asked of works of art, such as, how the principle ideas of the work came to be generated; what was its original audience; how it relates to other similar works, etc. The answers to these questions may well be useful for understanding *Aesthetic Theory* as a historical document, but it will not necessarily help us to evaluate its claims about the world.[39] If, on the other hand, we assume *Aesthetic Theory* is philosophical in a more traditional sense, then conventions of reading

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[39] Paul Crowther gives an example of how critics with different backgrounds treat the same text differently. In a review article of M. Iversen's *Alois Riegl: Art History and Theory*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1993). He writes

> Like many art historians, Iversen's tendency is to approach theory as if it were a work of art. By this I mean that considerable emphasis is placed on how a theory came to be generated; who it was originally addressed to, etc. Now, as has already been noted, this is of some value in understanding Riegl's work as a historical product, but it severely restricts Iversen's capacity to negotiate the work's status as a body of truth claims.

P. Crowther, "More Than Ornament: The Significance of Riegl", *Art History*, 1994. p.493.

philosophy will, in turn, focus on testing the validity of particular substantive claims in isolation from considerations of their historical context. To complicate things even more, Adorno is committed to undermining the kind of division of labor implied by the separation of these different modes of critical practice. This is not to say that Adorno treats all texts and traditions of argument in the same way. He is too close to Hegel, with the latter's emphasis on the differences between art and philosophy, to do that. Rather, art and philosophy are centers of gravity whose concerns intersect and overlap, as do the modes of criticism associated with them.

The implications of this proposition for reading Adorno can be grasped when we observe that his critical discussion of other authors rarely takes any text at face value. A work we would normally think of as philosophy, for instance, might be read in an unfamiliar way. For example, Adorno describes how he was influenced by Kracauer's unorthodox approach to reading Kant:

> As he presented it to me, Kant's critical philosophy was not simply a system of transcendental idealism. Rather, he showed me how the objective-ontological and subjective-idealist moments warred within it, how the more eloquent passages in the work are wounds this conflict has left in the theory.[40]

In other words, through Kracauer, Adorno became attuned to a conflict between the objective philosophical problems Kant is addressing and the particular constraints imposed on the way he confronts these problems. In this description of how he read Kant, Adorno then extrapolates to the general notion of a tension between "objective" and "expressive" moments in philosophy:

> ...through Kracauer I perceived for the first time the expressive moment in philosophy: putting into words the thoughts that came into one's head. The opposite moment, the moment of rigor, of compelling objectivity in thought, took second place to it. For quite a while after I first encountered it in the practice of philosophy at the university it seemed academic to me, until I found out that among the tensions that are the lifeblood of philosophy the tension between expressiveness and rigor is perhaps the most central.[41]

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[40] T.W. Adorno, "The Curious Realist: On Siegfried Kracauer", in T. W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature Vol 2*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, (New York: Columbia University Press,1992), p. 59.
[41] T.W. Adorno, "The Curious Realist: On Siegfried Kracauer", p. 59.

Reading the "expressiveness" of philosophy, as Adorno describes his reading of Kant, is surprising and unorthodox. It is also exemplary of the way Adorno extends critical conventions beyond the traditions wherein they were originally developed and applied. With his own work, the titles of his books give us clues as to their subjects: *Hegel: Three Studies*, *Notes to Literature*, *Aesthetic Theory*, *In Search of Wagner*, etc. Although these titles define a particular area of emphasis, the arguments deployed, and the allusions made, do not necessarily confine themselves to the framework of disciplinary conventions the titles suggest we might expect. The arguments of different philosophers, polemic, history, criticism, Marxism, are deliberately worked together to produce writing that might uncharitably be described as always trying to say too much.

The 'absence of discipline' in the title of this section can therefore be taken as having two meanings. First, it signifies Adorno's lack of respect for traditional disciplinary boundaries. Second, it reflects Adorno's refusal or inability to conclude arguments, alluded to earlier in the comparison with Hegel. So, although we need frames of reference to make any sense of Adorno, once they become entrenched or rigidly demarcated, they can be debilitating because they necessarily concentrate on one aspect of a text which does not conclude and has multiple identities. It is a notion of this kind of complexity which I take Albrecht Wellmer to be thinking about when he writes,

> Adorno's texts on aesthetics have something of the work of art about them, and to this extent can neither be exhausted nor surpassed by interpretation and critique. However interpretation and critique might well take on, with respect to these texts, the function of a magnifying glass. If one reads the text with the help of a magnifying glass, it is possible that layers of meaning which to the naked eye blend into each other will now separate and gain an independence from each other. The image of a stereoscope would be better still: it would here be a question of producing a three-dimensional picture that would reveal the latent depth of the texts. Through this kind of "stereoscopic" reading of Adorno one will discover that his incomparable capacity for penetrating experience philosophically has permitted him - even in the limited

> representational medium of a philosophical subject-object dialectic - to give expression to much that in fact resists representation in this medium.[42]

In the light of these observations, what is really difficult about Adorno, I suggest, is that the principle of *mediation* - the idea that everything is mutually defining - is not something he identifies as a philosophical model to be abstractly applied as a method of understanding the world, but a *modus operandi*. *Aesthetic Theory* does more than impinge on the territories of traditionally distinct disciplines, it assumes their different modes of argument, methodologies, and expectations in a partial fusion which reveals as much about the incompatibility of history and aesthetic judgement as the necessity of understanding their inextricable unity in the representation of the concrete particular. One way of explaining what this means for understanding the character of *Aesthetic Theory* is to consider it in the light of a discription Baudrillard uses in the Introduction to *The System of Objects*. Baudrillard is concerned here with finding an appropriate language to describe objects as they are defined by the process of their technological formation. He makes a distinction between this kind of understanding of an object and one which is based on reading the object I terms of the way it fulfills social or psychological needs after it has been made. Baudrillard quotes at length from Gilbert Simondon's account of the petrol engine.

> In todays engines each important part is so closely associated with the others by reciprocal exchange of energy that it cannot undergo any essential variation whatsoever.... The form of the cylinder head, the metal of which it is manufactured, works in combination with all the other elements of the cycle to produce a particular temperature in the electrodes of the sparking plug; this temperature in turn affects the characteristics of the ignition and of the cycle as a whole.
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> Modern engines are concrete, whereas earlier ones were abstract. In the older version, each component intervened at a specific stage of the cycle and was then supposed to have no further impact on the others; motor parts were rather like people, each doing their job without ever getting acquainted with their co-workers....The technical object may thus be said to have a primitive form, an abstract form, in which each theoretical and material unit is treated as an absolute needing to be set up as a closed system if it is to function properly. Such a situation presents a set of problems of integration that have to be resolved....This is the point at which specific structures emerge which specific structures emerge which, relative to each component, one

[42] A.Wellmer, "Truth, Semblance, Reconciliation: Adorno's Aesthetic Redemption of Modernity', trans. M.Cooke, *Telos* 62 (Winter 1984-85), p. 115.

> might call defense mechanisms: for instance, the cylinder head of the internal-combustion heat engine starts to bristle with cooling fins. These were at first simply an extraneous element , as it were, added to the cylinder and cylinder head for the sole purpose of cooling. In more recent engines, however, these fins have come to play a mechanical role as well as providing a ribbing that serves to inhibit the distortion of the cylinder head under the pressure of gasses....Now the two functions are no longer distinguishable; a unique structure has thus evolved, one which is not a compromise but a concomitance, a convergence. The ribbed cylinder head may now be made thinner , which allows for faster cooling. The bivalent fin/rib structure therefore fulfills the two formerly separate functions by means of a synthesys - and the result is far more satisfactory in both cases : it integrates the two functions and transcends them....We may say, then, that the new structure is more concrete than the old and that it represents a genuine advance for the technical object, for the true technological problem is the need for a convergence of functions within a single structural feature, not the need for a compromise between conficting requirements. Ultimately, this progression from abstract to concrete means that the technical object will tend towards the state of a system that is completely internally consistent and completely unified.[43]

There are several ways this extremely interesting passage can be understood as relevant to *Aesthetic Theory*. In this chapter I have given various different explanations for the difficulty of *Aesthetic Theory* and Simondon's analysis of recent engines provides an example of a way of how to think these different kinds of difficulty as a concomitance, a convergence which fulfills distinct functions by means of synthesis. From a more distant perspective, the same argument can be applied to the multidisciplinarity of *Aesthetic Theory*.

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[43] G. Simondon, *Du mode d'existence des objects techniques*, (Paris: Aubier, 1958), pp. 25-6 in J. Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict, (London: Verso, 1996), p. 5.

Chapter II

MEDIATION AND REIFICATION

Until Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* of 1923, Marxism concentrated on the politics and economics of capitalism as the absolute targets for revolutionary transformation. Marxists held that if the economic and political organization of society was transformed, then emancipation in every sphere of life would follow. In *History and Class Consciousness* Lukács acknowledges capitalism has *objective* symptoms in the political and economic spheres. His original insight, however, is that it also has a *subjective* symptom. Capitalism transforms experience of the world *per se*, well beyond economics and politics. The mechanism of capitalism's capacity to do this is the "reification" of experience which it precipitates. Simply put, "reification" is the extreme simplification of experience; the actual contingencies and complexities of experience become obscured and are overlooked. Lukács' argument is significant, not just for Adorno, but for Western Marxism in general. For the first time, the impact of capitalism is seen to derive from its power as a system of representing the world.

The power of capitalism, thus redefined, radically alters the potential for, and means of, revolution. Where the power of capitalism was identified with the ownership of means of production, the capacity to resist it was invested in the proletariat *qua* alienated labour. For Lukács, the proletariat remains the key. In the new scenario, however, he ascribes to it the unique potential to experience the world in a manner that is not completely reified. Adorno does not share Lukács' confidence in the proletariat, and this fundamental departure from Lukács' position will be discussed in due course.

As well as Lukács' obvious preoccupation with re-aligning Marxism, we need to recognize the philosophical significance of his argument for Adorno. Inseparable from the Marxist moment in his thought, Adorno remains preoccupied by philosophical problems, specifically Kant's question of how we can be sure of the existence of a mind-independent reality. Following Hegel, however, Adorno believes that any attempt to answer the question as Kant did, in universal, ahistorical terms, will simply fail. For Hegel and Adorno, experience cannot be separated from thought to be thought about. Any definition of experience which supposes that experience can be thus thought about, ignores something. As a definition, it ignores the impact on the explanation of experience it derives of mechanisms brought into play in the attempt to think about experience. From Hegel's perspective, Kant does not see this. Not so much because Kant makes an active decision to avoid the issue, but because his method prohibits him from recognizing its significance. This, for Hegel, predisposes Kant's argument towards skepticism. Hegel's antidote to Kant's difficulties is to argue that philosophy must concern itself, not just with whether it is possible to know about the world, but with knowing what it might be to know. This involves Hegel in the almost infinite complexity of having to explain how various forms of knowledge of the world have come to be how they are. He explains that the various representations of the world offered through art, religion, and philosophy of the past, including Kant's, are not necessarily 'wrong'. Rather, they are restricted by the order of experience available at a particular historical moment, and the medium through which that experience is represented. Thus, for example, the representation of the world offered through an art work, will be circumscribed by the particular historical configuration of experience at the time of its production. As well as being thus historically mediated, the art work is also constrained as a medium through which it experiences and represents. For Hegel, the medium of art is the "imagination," as opposed to

philosophy, whose medium is "reason". It follows that art and philosophy of the same historic moment will, nevertheless, experience and represent the world differently.

From the perspective of Hegel's response to the methodological basis for Kant's skepticism, Lukács' idea of reification has a particular significance. The idea of the reification extends Hegel's understanding that experience is subject to historical transformation to the present. If, as Hegel argues, experience cannot be sufficiently thought as a universal, then the most general significance of reification, for Adorno, is precisely that it is not a universal definition of experience. Potentially, reification is a historical mode of experiencing the world in which philosophizing takes place. Adorno never misses the opportunity to emphasize the pervasiveness of reification. While this is certainly grounds for skepticism, reification also functions as an antidote to the temptation of repeating Kant's error of taking experience to be something which might be stepped out of for analysis. Put another way, how might it be possible for the philosopher to conceive of a way of experiencing the world that is beyond the historical horizon of that philosopher's experience?

We need to understand that Adorno conceives of his project as taking place within the blanket reification of experience. Reification functions in Adorno's argument in two different senses. First, it is operative as a Marxist truth claim that all experience is socially conditioned. Reification thereby provides a framework for understanding every representation as socially mediated. Second, as we have seen, reification is operative in a Hegelian sense in so far as it functions as a historically specific mutation of experience. Within the reification of consciousness, a philosophical account of experience has to ask what it might be to know something in an un-reified way. It must do this before considering the question of how it might be possible to transcend reification.

In Hegel, the sufficiency of reason and the teleology of his system allow the supercession of one historical mutation of experience by the next. In Hegel, it is philosophical reflection, as the most advanced mode of experience of a historical moment, that precipitates the transition into a new mode of experiencing the world. Hegel, we will recall, had argued that art and religion have been superseded by philosophy as modes of experiencing and representing the world. This is because they were unable to experience or represent the world as fully rational, a task philosophy is equipped to do. Lukács deploys the same teleological principle to argue that philosophy has become obsolete: "classical philosophy is able to think the deepest and most fundamental problems of the development of bourgeois society through to the very end - on the plane of philosophy".[1] Now, under reification, it is the consciousness of the proletariat, in its potential immunity from reification, which possesses the capacity to represent and experience the world properly. Contrary to Hegel, for Adorno reason is neither sufficient, nor is rational thought the most advanced mode of experiencing the world, nor does Adorno think teleologically. Neither, as has been suggested, does Adorno share Lukács' confidence in the proletariat. How then, might reified experience be transcended without the sufficiency of reason or the revolutionary potential of the proletariat? This is what Adorno sets out to investigate and explain in *Aesthetic Theory*.

An incomplete explanation of Adorno's position in *Aesthetic Theory* will be presented here to situate it in relation to the above argument. What will be given now is a summary of how reification might be transcended. What will not be given here is an explanation of how Adorno explains why it is possible to identify experience as reified at all, if it is impossible to take a position outside it.

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[1] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. R. Livingstone, (London: Merlin Press, 1971), p. 121.

Although the reification of experience is ubiquitous, it is not necessarily the absolute condition of all experience under capitalism. How does Adorno defend the latter proposition? He never defends it directly. Rather the indirect importance of "mediation" and "mimesis" emerge as significant. As we saw in the previous chapter, especially through Adorno's critique of Benjamin, the principle of mediation, as Adorno practices it, represents experience as infinitely complex. As such, mediation functions as "ideology critique" of the false simplicity of reified experience. From this angle, we could legitimately expect Adorno to be hostile to the idea of mimesis traditionally associated with ideas of realism. Any idea of realism in representation implies an immediate, or potentially immediate, relationship to the object represented. If this order of representation is not already reified, it would seem, at the very least, to be complicit with the radical simplicity of reified experience. Indeed it is but, as we have seen, the idea of mimesis has always been intensely ambiguous and manipulable. For Adorno, an act of mimesis is not necessarily adequately understood as a function of experience. To use the critique of reification to discount a realistic mimetic act would be to imply that a mimetic act is sufficiently described by its identity as a mode of experience. No act of representing the world can be defined purely with reference to its status as either experience, medium, context, or the object it represents. This principle of the irreducibility of a representation to a single, necessary, aspect of its definition is mediation being put into practice by Adorno in his analysis of representation. That is to say, because every representation is a complex unity of representations, it cannot be fully accounted for with reference to one of its mediations. The same principle, applied to the analysis of every act of representation, allows that an individual act of representation can, potentially, be identified as having a degree of autonomy. The achievement of this autonomy is not however guaranteed for every representation, nor is it assured by a reading which takes account of all possible

mediations. Autonomy is also a function of the way the representation is configured. In other words, to be autonomous, which is not to be determined by any one of the necessary mediations which define it, a representation has to be read as mediated, but it also, has to configure itself in a special way. Put simply, the status of autonomy is a function of reception and representation. The complexities generated by this mutual dependence of a representation and its reception can be signaled as indicating something of what it means to claim the mutual dependence of philosophy and art in *Aesthetic Theory*. The capacity to achieve autonomy, and so elude reification, is not 'given' to philosophy and art, nor is its achievement guaranteed. Rather, the possibility of transcending reification resides in the manifestation of their potential mimetic capacities. *Aesthetic Theory* can be thought of as an extended consideration of whether and how this might be possible.

The detailed implications of this claim will emerge in subsequent chapters. For the moment, however, we need to step back from the direction of Adorno's argument to consider a particularly problematic moment in it. We need to emphasize Adorno's continued commitment to the critical deployment of rational thought, and to consider what this says about his attitude to the relation between philosophy and capitalist society. Hegel, we will recall, believed in the sufficiency of reason, so it was quite logical for him to posit rational thought as the guarantee of knowing. In the Introduction to his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, he writes, "in the case of thought no question can be raised about meaning because it is meaning itself. There is nothing behind it, ...for thought is the last thing, the deepest, and behind it there is nothing else; it is entirely itself'.[2] For Adorno, thought is not thus guaranteed; it is thoroughly mediated, and for one thing, this means it is always already reified. On the terms of this assertion alone, the possibility of critical rational thought already

[2] G.W.F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. T.M. Knox and A.V.Miller, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 89.

looks compromised. Orthodox Marxists have always been suspicious, if not hostile, to Adorno's apparent valorization of 'thought' over revolutionary 'activity'. Quite apart from the Orthodox Marxist suspicion of his position, a major strand of nineteenth and twentieth-century thought has understood the negative impact of modern society as deriving from its increasing rationalization of life. This attitude has frequently emphasized the culpability of any order of rational behavior, emphasizing the global significance of the 'irrational' as an antidote to alienation. *Aesthetic Theory* does not obviously fit within this schema. For the proponents of the 'irrational' as the emancipatory antidote to rationalization, Adorno's continuing commitment to the critical capacity of reason appears thoroughly compromised. Adorno's defense in the light of this criticism and his critique of the 'irrationalist' tradition from which it originates, can be signaled by referring to something Merleau-Ponty said of Hegel: "it was he who started the attempt to explore the irrational and integrate into an expanded reason..."[3] Hegel is being described by Merleau-Ponty as attempting to make rational thought inclusive of the "irrational". Now, this is an obviously paradoxical enterprise. So paradoxical, that for 'irrationalist' critics of Hegel, his failure is the failure of reason. More to the point, Hegel's enterprise, and any attempt at its prolongation, seem to be precisely that blind, all consuming, reason which the apologists for the "irrational" see as the problem. For the 'irrationalist', reason and the "irrational" are *de facto* incompatible.

As has already been emphasized repeatedly, Adorno shares the belief that Hegel failed. This does not, however, prohibit for him Hegel's aspiration. Merleau-Ponty completes the sentence quoted above, saying that what Hegel aspired to do "remains the task of our century." Adorno is by no means alone in his attitude to Hegel. The question is, what shape does "an expanded reason" take in *Aesthetic Theory*? How does reason configure itself in

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[3] M. Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-sense*, trans. H.L. Dreyfus, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p.26. Quoted in Mark C. Taylor (ed.), *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p.2.

relation to the "irrational" or, to use Adorno's importantly different vocabulary, how can reason maintain its critical identity and account for the "nonidentical"?

The significance of Hegel's critique of Kant for understanding what this might involve is pivotal. As has been suggested, Hegel's critique of Kant can be read as implying a wholesale transformation of how the activity of doing philosophy should be construed. Adorno himself is clear that one way of defining Hegel's enterprise is as an extension, or fulfilling of Kant. Adorno says "Hegel helped Kant's critical philosophy come into its own"[4] and speaks of Hegel's philosophy as "extending the transcendental philosophy of the *Critique of Pure Reason*".[5] At one level, and this is the level of Adorno's interest in Hegel's critique of Kant, Hegel is the first philosopher to understand and deploy the implications of the idea that what a philosopher says and does in saying, cannot be understood as separable. What a philosopher theorizes, and what he practices in articulating his theories, are mediated, and need to be completely consistent with each other.[6]

Beginning with Hegel's critique of Kant, this chapter traces a schematic development of the implications of understanding rational thinking as mediated for Hegel, Marx, Lukács, and Adorno. Each of these thinkers criticized his predecessor's self-understanding of the 'situatedness' of his thought in relation to his method. In each case, this critique becomes part of a reformulation of the task of thinking, which is subsequently pursued on a different trajectory and in a different form. In establishing the idea of a tradition of philosophical self-transformation, the aim is to situate the formal oddity of *Aesthetic Theory* within a tradition

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[4] T.W. Adorno, "Aspects of Hegel's Philosophy", in T.W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1993), p. 8.

[5] T.W. Adorno, "Aspects of Hegel's Philosophy", p. 30.

[6] A broadly similar strategy which has served to emphasise Hegel's debt to Kant's Transcendental Deduction has been suggested by Robert Pippin. See Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Particularly the section "Kantian and Hegelian Idealism", pp. 16-41. See also Sally Sedgwick, "Hegel's Treatment of Transcendental Apperception in Kant", *The Owl of Minerva: Biannual Journal of the Hegel Society of America* 23 (Spring 1992), pp. 151-163. and Sally Sedgwick, "Hegel on Kant's Antinomies and Distinction Between General Logic and Transcendental Logic', *The Monist* 74 (July 1991), p. 403.

of mutating philosophy a tradition which has seen the transformation of the scope and significance of philosophical thought as inseparable from new thought, and new ways of thinking the "nonidentical".

There are two kinds of impact this way of situating *Aesthetic Theory* should be understood as aiming at. First, it seeks to make some of the arguments of *Aesthetic Theory* more intelligible, specifically through a clarification of Adorno's simultaneous commitment to philosophy and to Marxism. These are often thought of as mutually incompatible modes of representing the world. Describing Marxism as part of a philosophical tradition helps to explain Adorno's attitude to them. Second, this chapter situates *Aesthetic Theory* in relation to an alignment of Hegel's critique of Kant, Marx's critique of Hegel, and Lukács critique of Marx. The aim of so doing is to imply that although *Aesthetic Theory* is most obviously thought of as a work of aesthetics, its strategic significance, or rather its strategic aspirations, can be understood differently. The claim is that *Aesthetic Theory* can be thought of as part of a history of attempts to explain the possibility of experience. A history from Kant's Transcendental philosophy, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Marx's *German Ideology* and Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*.

Kant

Before Kant, philosophers argued variations of the idea that the world as we experience it is already organized in such a way that we can make sense of it. In this scenario, experience is characterized as the essentially passive reception of prearranged items. Against this hypothesis, Kant claimed we do not find the world to be so organized, but that we perform the organization ourselves.

The way Kant establishes this claim is, primarily, through the Transcendental Deduction in the first *Critique*. There is a huge literature on this which cannot be discussed in the present context. However, Kant's basic strategy might be summarized as follows.[7] The objective structure of the phenomenal world and the unity of self-consciousness are reciprocally correlated - one cannot have one without the other. At the heart of this bonding is the application of "the pure concepts of the understanding," or, as they are more familiarly known, the "categories". For Kant any item which is to become an object of cognition must be given in space and/or time (those so called "forms of intuition" which are also part of the human subjects cognitive apparatus). This "manifold of intuitions" must also be organized by the categories and, in applying these, the human subject also organizes its own powers of imaginative projection and recall, thus creating the objective unity of self-consciousness, as well as that of the external phenomenal world.

This line of argument is one that emphasizes the active nature of experience. How the phenomenal world and self appear to knowledge is a function of the understandings own 'synthetic' or organizational activity. Whatever the merits of this approach, however, it leaves the nature of the world and the ultimate nature of the world and the ultimate nature of the self as they are *in themselves* (i.e. qua noumenal) as necessary but unknowable remainders.

For Hegel, the active structure of experience, and the unknowable status of noumena, are both critically pertinent.

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[7]This account of the Transcendental Deduction is derived from Paul Crowther's paper "Judgement, Self-Consciousness and Imagination: Kant's Transcendental Deduction and Beyond", in H. Parret (ed.) *Kant's Aesthetic Theory*, (Berlin: Gruyter Verlag, 1997).

Hegel's critique of Kant

Hegel's critique of Kant appears at various moments in his philosophy, but its broad strategy does not change significantly. The argument needs to be seen against his broad characterization of the inherent problems in Kant's approach outlined in the introduction to the *Phenomenology* (1807). Hegel's critique of Kant here is very much loaded towards defining his own position. A more traditional reading of Kant is developed in the, much later, third volume of his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (1825-1826).[8]

We might expect Hegel's critique of Kant to focus specifically on Kant's necessary, but extremely problematic, positing of a noumenal self and noumenal world. Indeed it does, but Hegel approaches the issue indirectly. Hegel's critique of Kant's distinction between the phenomenal and noumenal is inseparable from his critique of Kant's implicit claim to be a detached observer of experience. Hegel, by contrast, calls for the philosopher to conceive of himself as an active participant in the processes he is describing. It is therefore important to recognize that, while Hegel is interested in the particular claims Kant makes, his is a metacritical reading of Kant, because he does not attempt to address Kant's problems on their own terms. Rather, he explains Kant's difficulties as arising out of an incomplete understanding of what it means to think. Hegel's argument is a significant theoretical basis for understanding Adorno for two reasons. First, as an exemplary manifestation of metacritical of reading, second in the way Hegel carries through the implications of his critique of Kant to his own project.

According to Hegel, Kant "takes for granted certain ideas about cognition as an *instrument* as *medium*, and assumes that there is a *difference between ourselves and this*

[8] see G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: The Lectures of 1825-1826: Volume III: Medieval and Modern Philosophy*, (ed.) Robert.F. Brown, trans. Robert.F. Brown, J..M. Stewart and H.S.Harris, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 217-246.

cognition".[9] If we take this criticism as relevant to the matter at hand, then, Hegel seems to imply that the unity of self and world shown by the Transcendental Deduction is much more than a correlation. Indeed, for Hegel the categories are not separate from that which they give form to. Thought is ultimately *constitutive* of its objects. There is no noumenal remainder. Hence, whilst Kant makes a distinction between noumenal self and phenomenal world, which he must then attempt to bridge, this is, for Hegel, a false construal of the problem of philosophy. Rather, the task of philosophy must be to demonstrate their mutually constitutive sameness.

In the critique of Kant in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel considers the problem Kant creates for himself by dividing up experience into the categories, on the one hand, and the manifold of sensible intuitions on the other. Kant argues that categories must be deployed by the understanding in every experience, or there would be no possibility of synthesizing the manifold of intuitions. Hegel writes,

> This bonding of the categories with the stuff of perception is what Kant understands by "experience." And that is quite correct. There is perceiving in experience, there is stuff in it that belongs to feeling, to intuition. But this stuff is not apprehended merely according to its singularity or immediacy. To the contrary, it is posited in the very bonding with those categories (such as cause and effect) or, in short, with what we call natural laws, universal determinations or genera. The latter are not immediate perceptions.[10]

In other words, the subject, the world, the categories, the intuition, and the understanding are all simultaneously operative in experience which *is* their unity. The problem for Kant and with Kant - and this is Hegel's fundamental insight - is that he "adopted the thought determinations, the categories empirically, just as they have been worked out in [traditional] logic."[11] Thus, Kant broke experience apart in an analytical fashion and then showed that it could not be rebuilt out of its constituent parts. This means that the gap

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[9] G.W.F.Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V.Miller, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 47.
[10] G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, p. 227.
[11] G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, p. 229.

between "appearances" and "things in themselves," which perpetually dogged Kant, is a function of the *unrecognized* lack of correspondence between Kant's logical representation of experience and experience itself. He treated experience as though it was an object *before* him. Hegel says "This procedure is empirical and philosophically unjustified."[12] It reproduces, throughout Kant's argument a "battery of dichotomies", which stand in the way of comprehending philosophy, reason, and experience as an inseparable dynamic unity.[13] Where Kant sees the understanding and the data of the senses as logically separate, Hegel argues we need to see them as an indivisible unity. What for Kant were the passive sensibility, which receives sensation, and the active understanding, which synthesizes this data, for Hegel, are one and the same thing.[14]

In making his criticism of Kant's definition of the categories as an *a priori* of consciousness, Hegel invokes Fichte. "Fichte went beyond this, and that is his great merit. He called for and sought to complete, the derivation or construction of the categories of thought from the I, and he did in part carry out this project."[15] That is to say, Fichte is construed as directly responding to Kant's representation of experience. Fichte partially corrects Kant's errors by making the unified "I" of consciousness *a priori*, rather than the categories. "The I is active, it is determining, it produces its determinations."[16] The particularities of Fichte's argument are part of his importance for Hegel. Of equal significance, however, is the way Hegel extrapolates the implications of what Fichte does for what it might mean to do

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[12] G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, p. 229.
[13] David Lamb uses the phrase "battery of dichotomies" in "Teleology: Kant and Hegel" in Stephen Priest (ed.), *Hegel's Critique of Kant*, p. 174.
[14] One commentator suggests that Hegel argues precisely this point in the early work *Faith and Knowledge*: "Hegel's view was that the "true" meaning of the Transcendental Deduction is that intellect (*Verstand*) and intuition (*Anschuung*) cannot be kept apart as separate faculties at all. They are, contrary to Kant's understanding, "one and the same synthetic unity"".
see Sedgwick, Sally. "Hegel's Treatment of Transcendental Apperception in Kant", *The Owl of Minerva: Biannual Journal of the Hegel Society of America*, Vol 23, No 2, (Spring 1992), p. 155.
[15] G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, pp. 229-230
[16] G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, p. 230.

philosophy. It might be thought that one way to get round Kant's problem would be to say that he misunderstood the sensuous unity of experience. With an understanding of this unity of experience in mind, subsequent philosophy should base its analysis of experience on the understanding of it as a sensuous unity, rather than distinct moments.

From Hegel's perspective, this is all very well, but it does not address the cause of Kant's mistake, i.e., his allowing a partial distinction between thought and object. As an erroneous idea of the ultimate problem facing philosophy, Kant's positing of the noumenal defines the internal dynamic of his argument, and replicates itself in its content. In the following quotation from his reading of Fichte, Hegel frames his attitude to philosophizing *in* experience by making a distinction between an "ordinary" consciousness and another form of "philosophical" consciousness. The former grasps relations within the object of its experience, the latter grasps the assumptions which enable the former to take place:

> When we philosophize about being, cause, effect, and so forth, then we make being, cause and effect into our consciousness. When I say "the paper is white," I maintain thereby that the paper is white [ordinary consciousness grasps the relation "white" and "paper," but does not grasp the "it is"]. But when I maintain that it *is*, then I make being - a pure category - into my consciousness, and so make my consciousness into consciousness and in this way I stand behind my ordinary consciousness. I am always in the state of knowing, and in this instance I make that knowing into my object. To the extent that we know our knowing there is no difficulty about it. It was Fichte who first brought the knowing of knowing to consciousness. What is more, by doing that, Fichte also posited philosophical consciousness or the aim of philosophy as the knowing of knowing.[17]

This is extremely dense, but Hegel is saying that behind the assertion that something is the case, is the unity of the 'something' and the maker of the 'assertion,' because both simply are. To make the assertion that something has being is also to assert that, I, the originator of the assertion, also have being. This understanding has the effect of making "my consciousness into consciousness." In other words, my "ordinary" consciousness of the

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[17] G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, p. 231.

object, becomes a *part* of my consciousness. This consciousness of being conscious of an object is possible, for Hegel, because "I am always in a state of knowing". Hegel, we will recall, says "...thought is the last thing, the deepest, and behind it there is nothing else..."[18]

In the light of this argument, there appears to be a common emphasis in Kant's noumenal subject and Hegel's philosophical "knowing of knowing" . Both imply some kind of stepping out, or stepping back from experience. We have already seen, however, that Hegel's argument is in a position to, or claims it is in a position to, *explain* this distinctness of self-consciousness in experiential terms.

This helps to explain one of the most obvious and far-reaching methodological differences between Kant and Hegel. The former conceives himself as dealing with experience as a universal and derives "causal laws of Human perception," which, nevertheless, only apply to the phenomenal world. The latter understands the former's aspiration for such abstract universality as a function of his historical situatedness. For Hegel, to know knowing, is not to know experience as a universal, but to know that the truth of experience is "as historical becoming." With this idea of experience in Hegel, experience is a thoroughly mediated and historically unique. To know experience thus conceived, is to know how it came to be thus, and this is a function of history, art, religion, and philosophy. Thus, in Hegel, each moment in Kant's argument is modified. The noumenal self becomes consciousness, spontaneously generating its sense of self in the world through history. There is "reciprocity" between the self and the "laws governing human perceptions," but these laws only have the appearance of universality in Hegel. Such laws are actually the limitations placed on experience by the historical moment in the simultaneous development of world and consciousness. Hegel admits he could not have done his philosophy without Kant. Within the

[18] G.W.F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. T.M. Knox and A.V.Miller, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 89.

context of his philosophy as a whole, Hegel's critique of Kant is not, according to Hegel, ultimately a disagreement between two different modes of argument, but between philosophy at different moments in time, each restricted by their historical moment. Thus, Hegel says of philosophy,

> no more is to be demanded or expected of it than what it has done. We are not to look in it for a satisfaction which can be provided only by further developed knowledge. Every philosophy, precisely because it is the exposition of one particular stage of development, belongs to its own time and is caught in that time's restriction. The individual is the son of his people, of his world. He may give himself airs as he likes but he does not transcend his time since he belongs to the one universal spirit which is his substance and essence; how can he escape from this?[19]

This is a rhetorical question, because it is philosophy, in its capacity to know its own condition which holds the germ of progress. Owing to its form, *qua* the critical deployment of reason, philosophy can transform the historically limited conception of experience at that time, moving experience to a more sophisticated self-understanding. Hegel explains:

> If philosophy does not stand above its time in content, it does so in form, because as the thought and knowledge of that which is the substantial spirit of its time, it makes that spirit its object. In as far as philosophy is in the spirit of its time, the latter is its determined content in the world although as knowledge, philosophy is above it since it places it in the relation of object...thus the formal difference is also the real and actual difference.[20]

Where, for Kant, the problem of philosophy is how a universal subject can be sure of the objective structure of reality. Hegel's starting point might be described as the rhetorical question of how he himself, a particular consciousness, came to be experiencing the world in the way he does. How is Hegel thinking the thoughts he is thinking at a particular time and place about the world as it is at that time and place? Kojève puts this brilliantly in a hypothetical reconstruction of Hegel's state of mind as he sits down in his study to start writing *The Phenomenology*:

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[19] G.W.F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, pp. 49-50.
[20] G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures in the History of Philosophy*, pp. 54-55.

> "I am not only a thinking being, I am also - and above all - Hegel. What then is this Hegel?"
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> To begin with, he is a man of flesh and blood, who *knows* that he is such. Next, this man does not float in empty space. He is seated in a chair, at a table, writing with a pen on paper. And he *knows* that all these objects did not fall from the sky; he knows that those things are products of something called human *work*...he hears sounds from afar. But he does not here mere *sounds*. He knows in addition that these sounds are cannon shots...He knows he is hearing shots from Napoleon's cannons at the battle of Jena.[21]

Now, if Hegel actually achieved what he set out to do, then his critique of Kant would be definitive. The problem is that he did not, and this leaves two broad alternatives. Either, as Schopenhauer did, you conceive of Hegel's whole enterprise as so much hot air, and return to Kant, and more specifically, re-establish the broad terms of Kant's relationship between philosophy and experience as the proper paradigm for philosophical inquiry. Or, you accept the trajectory of Hegel's critique of Kant, and consider the implications for the re-orientation of philosophy in the light of Hegel's failure. The following discussion of Marx, Lukács, and Adorno understands them as taking the second route. Before continuing to look at Marx's critique of Hegel, it is worth briefly re-emphasizing the aspiration of this 'second route,' by recalling what Merleau-Ponty was quoted earlier as saying of Hegel. Hegel "started the attempt to explore the irrational and integrate it into an expanded reason" One of the apparent paradoxes of Hegel's critique of Kant is that throughout Kant is criticized for not being fully rational. He makes philosophically unjustifiable assumptions. If we take Hegel's argument seriously, then he is not saying that Kant is not being rational within what he does, far from it. Indeed, the internal consistency of Kant's argument, even when it leads him to make implausible claims about, for example, the noumenal self, is precisely what makes him such a profoundly impressive philosopher. Hegel's point is that Kant was not being fully rational in his *deployment* of reason. He did not think through the full implications

[21] A. Kojève, *Introduction to the reading of Hegel*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 34

of what he was doing for what he was saying. In being more fully rational than Kant, and it is Hegel's claim that he is, the logic of Hegel's critique of Kant drives him far beyond the bounds of philosophy, as Kant understood it. This is because, for Hegel, the knowing of knowing, is the knowing of knowing in all its mediations at a particular moment of history. Hegel becomes a world historian, an art historian, a theologian, a naturalist, etc. For Kant, and neo-Kantians like Schopenhauer, the "irrational" is signified as that which is definitively beyond philosophy - the noumenal world. For Hegel, and post-Hegelians, the "irrational" is not to be pursued as a distinct realm, but the mediations of the particular experience.

From a different perspective, Kant is said to have isolated and defined what is unique and significant to philosophy as a distinct mode of knowledge. This division of labour allows that such discretely defined modes of knowledge can be understood and pursued with great *efficiency*.[22] As should be clear from the above characterization of Hegel's critique of Kant, this division of labour is corrosive of any attempt to understand the truth of experience, *qua* the unity of its mediating moments at a given moment in time. One thing which Hegel is not, is an efficient thinker. He is inefficient in terms of the length of time he takes to say things. He is also inefficient, from Marx's point of view, in the sense that he never gets the job done properly. Despite his claims for systematic completeness, his philosophy misses a mediation in the analysis of the particular experience. The problem with Hegel's "expanded" reason, as read by Marx, is that it comes up against an unacknowledged limit that, *qua* reason, it cannot get beyond.

[22] Paul Crowther, *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. vii.

Marx's and Engels' Critique of Hegel

One aspect of Hegel's argument has proven particularly problematic and productive in its challenge to subsequent thinkers. It is the perception of an imbalance in the relation between the knowing mind and changing world, as Hegel practices it in his philosophy. That is to say, although Hegel maintains their mutual dependence, he always gives knowing the final say. Marx's critique and development of Hegel centers on the perception of this imbalance.

Discussions of Marx's debt to Hegel almost invariably include the following quotation from *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*:

> The outstanding achievement of Hegel's *Phenomenology* and of its final outcome, the dialectic of negativity as the moving and generating principle, is thus first that Hegel conceives the self creation of man as a process...[23]

Marx, in other words, appreciates the significance of the Hegelian emphasis on the idea of experience as an activity that changes through history, but Marx ascribes to this mechanism a very different motivation. Put simply, as far as Marx is concerned, despite Hegel's claim for experience as the dynamic unity of 'mind' and 'world', such unity is only achieved through Hegel's working assumption that the world is ultimately knowable. Consequently, regardless of Hegel's emphasis on experience as the mutual modification of 'man' and 'nature' through history, such 'activity' only ever takes place on the assumption that 'nature' is susceptible to sufficient knowing by the mind. For Marx, this definition of philosophy is precisely the kind of 'subjective' imposition by philosophy on its object which Hegel sought to avoid. According to Marx, Hegel makes everything he talks about "abstract". Nature, for example, is never considered for what it might be in itself, but as though it were knowable by mind. As a consequence, although Hegel discusses the material

[23] Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), p. 140.

world, even considers himself immersed in, and determined by it, his insights never get beyond a consideration of that aspect of phenomena which he and his system is sensitized towards. As Marx sees it, in Hegel's argument,

> ...wealth, state power, etc., are understood by Hegel as entities estranged from the *human* being, this only happens in their form as thoughts...They are thought entities, and therefore merely an estrangement of pure, i.e., abstract philosophical thinking.[24]

The failure of Hegel's project, then rests in its very success as a purely rational solution to what it posits as a rational problem. The internal consistency of Hegel's project cannot be questioned, but that rational consistency separates it from the material world where, for Marx, real problems have their origins. Thus, despite Hegel's emphasis on the necessarily mediated nature of philosophy in the world, his own philosophy never achieves a complete integration with the world it describes because the world is already presupposed as rational.

The Marxist 'correction' of Hegel

With this radical critique of Hegel in mind, the problem for Marxism is to maintain the idea of experience as a process of the dynamic integration of mind and world, to remove Hegel's predetermination of the world as "rational". In this process, however, philosophy itself will necessarily be transformed, because once Hegel's "abstract theorizing" is truly engaged by material reality, its own rational structures will cease to be the determining factor in the architecture of his argument. As Lukács puts it:

> ... we are forced to concede that actuality, content, matter reaches right into the form, the structures of the form and their interrelations and thus *into the structure of the system itself.* In that case the system must be abandoned as system. For then it will then be no more of a register, an account, as well

[24] Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, p. 138.

> ordered as possible, of facts which are no longer linked rationally and so can no longer be made systematic even though the forms of their components are themselves rational.[25]

This theme of the implosion of Hegel's system, once contaminated by the irrationality it fails to compensate for, will be returned to frequently in discussing Lukács and Adorno. For the moment, it is useful to consider that this implosion is configured differently by Marx, Lukács, and Adorno. The different implications of their critiques of Hegel have different permutations for the order of anti-systematicity they develop.

Marx's critique of the imbalance in Hegel is based on the idea that Hegel's argument might be "inverted". What Marx is usually understood to have done here is to give "material reality" the dominant role in defining the process of experience. Hegel, by contrast, writes in the Introduction to his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*:

> Man is distinguished from animals in virtue of his thinking. Feelings, instincts, etc., are common to man and beast, but particular feelings, e.g. religious, righteous, moral feelings, belong to man alone. Feelings as such, in themselves are neither estimable or true; what is true in them, e.g. that a feeling has a religious character, is derived from thinking alone.[26]

Thus Marx and Engels write, in what looks like a paraphrase, or an answering back at Hegel,

> Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce the means of their subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their actual physical organization. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life.[27]

So, while maintaining the idea of experience as "activity", Marx and Engels claim it is not the "activity of the mind", but the "activity of labour" which defines experience. It looks simple, but this inversion of Hegel ultimately sets up the hugely problematic division within

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[25] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. R. Livingstone, (London: Merlin Press, 1971), p. 118.
[26] G.W.F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, p. 89.
[27] Karl Marx & Fredrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1938), p. 7.

the dynamic of Marx's own theory (which diagnoses a problem) and the action of the proletariat (which is its remedy).

We have seen the way Hegel's critique of the content of Kant's argument signaled the wholesale reorienting and redefinition of the form of philosophy. At the same time, the role of the philosopher vis-à-vis his object is also changed. The same kind of transformation is implied by the Marxist critique of Hegel. A symptom of the new emphasis is the ambiguity of Marx's own writings: are they philosophy, economics or sociology? The uncertainty arises because while Marx's theory owes much of its force to Hegel's philosophy, Marx is not simply a philosopher in the way Hegel is. What distinguishes Marx's position from the tradition of philosophy from which it emerges is the positing of its own success beyond the realms of its own competence *qua* rational argument. This idea can be clarified by considering the following quotation from *Capital*. Here Marx defines his own method in contrast to Hegel.

> My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but it is its direct opposite. To Hegel, the life-process of the human brain, i.e., the process of thinking, which under the name of "the Idea", he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of "the Idea". With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought.[28]

The first sentence offers the Marxist characterization of Marx's and Hegel's arguments as "opposite". In the second, Marx gives a summary of his critique of Hegel, describing how Hegel's thought "abstracts" material reality. In the third sentence, Marx summarizes his own method, in opposition to Hegel, wherein "the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought." What is striking here is the way Marx ostensibly suggests a definition of experience which finds its

[28] Karl Marx, *Capital*, in David McLellan (ed.), *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 420.

nearest philosophical correlate in the pre-Kantian idea that consciousness passively experiences an already organized world. Material reality is taken to be immediately available to a passive consciousness determined by it. In other words, despite Marx's explicit commitment to the notion of experience as process, the methodological impact of his emphasis on material reality can be read as implying that experience as process is itself incompatible with the notion that it is determined by material reality. Having criticized Hegel for making experience passive by thematizing reason in the dialectic of experience, Marx and Engels reproduce a similar passivity by placing undue emphasis on material reality in the dialectic. In Orthodox Marxism this is precisely what happens. The rational subject of Hegel's philosophy looses both the dynamic and critical capacities of reason, and the 'scientific' claims of Orthodox Marxism are the result.

It would take too long to tease out all the implications of Marx's attempt to 'correct' Hegel. It needs to be emphasized, however, that whatever the shortcomings of Marx's argument, its relationship to Hegel remains essentially ambiguous. Traditionally, this ambiguity is seen to be reflected in a distinction between the early "Hegelian" Marx and the late "Scientific" Marx. While there are significant grounds for this thesis, the historical reception of Marx's writings has tended to be more important than particular texts in thematizing and polarizing the different tendencies in his argument. In this context, it is Lukács' reading of Marx which is significant.

Taken at face value, then, Marx's attempt to correct Hegel has a number of implications which, if scrutinized with philosophical rigor, throw the whole Marxist project into doubt. The most obvious is the self-declared "scientific" status of Marxism regarding its own claims for its knowledge of society and the associated critique of subjectivity. It is

against these two premises of Orthodox Marxism that Lukács wrote *History and Class Consciousness* in 1923.[29]

Lukács critique of Marxism[30]

Lukács' critique of Orthodox Marxism begins by accepting Marx's and Engels' objection to Hegel. As he puts it, Hegel's Idealism "succumbs to the delusion of confusing the intellectual reproduction of reality with the actual reproduction of reality itself."[31] One significant consequence of this broad approach to Marx (regardless of its concrete results) is the way it categorizes his work within the tradition of philosophy. In the works of the early 1920's, Lukács sees Marxism primarily as an analysis and description of the conditions of experience, rather than economic theory. Marxism is characterized as continuous with the philosophy of Kant and Hegel, and therefore constrained by the same strictures vis-à-vis their analysis and description of experience.[32] These themes converge in *History and Class Consciousness*.[33] In the 1967 *Preface* Lukács sets out the most obvious reason for rejecting the Marxist "inversion" of Hegel:

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[29] Arato and Breines describe the intellectual background to the book.

> ...Marxist thought virtually as a whole during the latter part of the nineteenth century had been dominated by what Korsch called a "Hegel amnesia" and what Lukács called "vulgar Marxism". By these terms they meant to characterise a standpoint in which dialectical and revolutionary understanding was displaced by a narrowly materialist and positivist approach that had reduced consciousness to an epiphenomenal reflection of economic structures and laws. As seen by Lukács and Korsch, such a Marxism was not and could not have been revolutionary; its constitutive premises could not comprehend, and thus not participate in, the process through which the proletariat could become the active self-conscious maker of history.

see Arato & Breines, *The Young Lukács and the Origins of Western Marxism*, (London: Pluto Press, 1979), p. 172.

[30] For a summary of the issues involved here see Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodore W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt School*, (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1977) pp. 25-28.

[31] Georg Lukács, "What is Orthodox Marxism", in *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 9.

[32] Lukács himself identifies this strategy of reading Marx's texts as philosophy as significantly different from the established patterns of their reception. Which is "...the tendency to view Marxism exclusively as a theory of society, as social philosophy, and hence to repudiate it as a theory of nature". See the Preface to the 1967 edition of Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*. p. xvi.

[33] Arato and Breines have suggested that the significance of this work is how "...its great achievements and its great dilemmas resulted from the preservation of 'idealist' elements within the new Marxian framework."

> The most primitive kind of work, such as the quarrying of stones by primeval man, implies a correct reflection of the reality he is concerned with. For no purposive activity can be carried out in the absence of an image, however crude, of the practical reality involved.[34]

Lukács point is that the idea of a separation between 'labour' *qua* 'physical activity' and 'thought' *qua* the 'activity of the mind' is itself a mistake. Thematizing 'labour' in this false division is to compound the error. Having made this simple, but potentially devastating objection to Orthodox Marxism, Lukács' strategy is to concentrate his analysis on the form of Marx's argument. Thus, on the first page of the essay 'What is Orthodox Marxism?' Lukács writes,

> Orthodox Marxism does not imply the uncritical acceptance of the results of Marx's investigations. It is not the 'belief' in this or that thesis, nor the exegesis of a 'sacred' book. On the contrary, orthodoxy refers exclusively to *method*.[35]

In other words, it is not the conclusions of Marx's and Engels' arguments that are important, but how they were arrived at.[36]

Lukács' own method reveals itself most clearly in "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat", where he focuses on the method and structure of Marx's 'commodity theory'.[37] Arguably the key to Marxism, the theory states that objects are 'commodified' when we cease to value them for their practical use. Instead, their value comes to be defined by the market. The process towards commodification is gradual. As patterns of trade

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Arato & Breines, *The Young Lukács and the Origins of Western Marxism*, p. 6. Significant for similar reasons are the essay of 1926 "Moses Hess and the Problems of Idealist Dialectics" and *Lenin: A Study of the Unity of his Thought* of 1924. In so far as these works anticipated the discovery of Marx's 1844 manuscripts, they awakened interest in the Hegelian strategies of Marxism and have set the terms of the debate for "Western Marxism" ever since. See Martin Jay, 'The Concept of Totality in Lukács and Adorno' in S. Avineri (ed.), *Varieties of Marxism*, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977), p. 157-58.

[34] See Preface to the 1967 edition of Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*,HX260.H8L9 p. xxv.

[35] Georg Lukács, "What is Orthodox Marxism?" in *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 1.

[36] In the 1922 Preface to *History and Class Consciousness* Lukács emphasises that he is not concerned with Marx's economic theory as such:

> There will be no assessment of the economic content of the theory of accumulation, nor of Marx's economic theories as such: we shall confine our discussion to their methodological premises and implications.

see Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. xlii.

[37] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*,HX260.H8L9 pp. 83-222.

develop, the process becomes more and more pervasive until, under Capitalism, it becomes completely dominant. Lukács' principal interest is in the mechanism by which Marx describes the emergence and development of the "commodity" form through this history.

In pre-capitalist societies the value of products exchanged between people is, at first, quite arbitrary. That is, their value is a function of their usefulness. If X and Y both have spears, the spears have no value beyond their function in hunting or fighting. If Y looses his spear, however, then X's acquires a new value. This new value, however, only exists as a function of the relation between X and Y. In other words, products have value within the context of a social relationship.

As society develops, relationships between people become more structured, and the arbitrariness of the value assigned to objects is correspondingly reduced. This process is not initially precipitated by the consumer or producer, but the merchant, as the go-between. In order for the merchant to operate, and the market to work, there has to be some system of equivalence between products. It is when products become valued, not for their potential usefulness, but for their place in this system of equivalence, that they become commodified; "...they take the form of commodities inasmuch as they are exchangeable, i.e. expressions of one and the same third.[38] It is here that Lukács makes his central claim that under capitalism, where the merchant's position becomes central to the system of exchange, the "commodity-structure" begins to transform consciousness and experience.

This is not what Orthodox Marxism claims. For the Orthodox Marxist, the individual consciousness is defined by its power and place in the economy. It is a "consumer", "producer", or "merchant". The proletariat, with its direct involvement in making, has a different relation to the product from the merchant and consumer who experience it only as a

[38] Marx quoted by Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, HX260.H8L9p. 85.

commodity. For Lukács, by contrast, it is not the relation to the means of production that determines consciousness, but the *mechanism* of commodification. This mechanism transforms society, beyond its economic organization, to "all its aspects" and ultimately, to experience itself. Thus, Lukács says, "...the problem of commodities must not be considered in isolation or even regarded as the central problem in economics, but as the central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects."[39] This 'commodity *structure*' Lukács identifies as the "reification". The presence of the word in the title of the essay signals its importance for his argument, and the definition he gives it is as follows:

> Its basis is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a 'phantom objectivity', an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people.[40]

In "reification", then, a "relation" is taken for a "thing". This transformation involves two aspects. First, a "relation" is something which exists between two or more people, or a person and a thing. Second, it is dynamic, without corporeal substance. In being taken for a "thing", the "relation" looses both of these characteristics; it comes to be identified as static corporeal substance. Something which is by definition dynamic, is frozen and becomes identifiable with a concrete object. With this newly acquired appearance of stability, this relationship *qua* concrete object, necessarily gains a new, more tangible presence and acquires a "phantom objectivity". What is important is that something dynamic is taken for something static, and simultaneously gains a new, more tangible presence.

A central theme of "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat" emerges as a discussion of how capitalism begins to remove the possibility of any real understanding of experience *qua* process. At every level of consciousness, essentially 'active' relations are reduced to one of their moments. Through this reduction, the newly found clarity it produces

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[39] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, HX260.H8L9p. 83.
[40] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, HX260.H8L9p. 83.

is taken for what is "real". The structure of every possible relationship is transformed from being an active mutual modification, into one component of that relation.

If, for a moment, we consider this argument within the wider debate about how to understand experience as historically changing, then Lukács' theory is a significant development. Hegel failed to represent experience, because he makes the error of thematizing knowing over material reality. Marx also fails, but he does so because of his thematization of material reality. What Lukács' theory does is to continue Hegel's strategy of historicizing knowing and shows that under capitalism it is the very insight that knowing itself is historically limited, that is compromised by the process of reification. Lukács argues that the inability of Kant and Hegel to adequately represent experience, stems not so much from philosophical 'error', but from the inability to recognize the extent to which the transformation of experience by capitalism compromises that effort from within. Thus Lukács opens the second section of 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' with the sentence: "Modern critical philosophy springs from the reified structure of consciousness."[41] Susan Buck-Morss describes the significance of Lukács' argument as follows:

> Instead of reducing bourgeois thought to the economic conditions of its production, Lukács argued that the nature of those conditions could be found within the intellectual phenomena themselves...
> ...The significance of Lukács' analysis was that instead of seeing bourgeois theory as a mere epiphenomenon, a thin veil for naked class interests, he argued and attempted to demonstrate that even the best bourgeois thinkers, in their most honest intellectual efforts, were not able to resolve contradictions in their theories, because the latter were based in a reality which was itself contradictory.[42]

As we have seen, Lukács arrives at this through his critique of Orthodox Marxism. An aspect of Lukács' critique of Orthodox Marxism can be thought of as questioning the basis for its outright rejection of philosophy, and more specifically, how that tradition of

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[41] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, HX260.H8L9p. 110.
[42] Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, p. 26.

philosophy is properly represented. Thus far in this chapter, I have presented an aspect of the history of bourgeois philosophy as though it arose out of each thinker criticizing and developing his predecessor. For the Orthodox Marxist this idea of the autonomy of the history of philosophy is an irrelevance. Since philosophers have their consciousness defined by their position within the pattern of production and consumption, their arguments can only ever represent the interests of their class. Think back to Kojève's description of Hegel sitting in his study, writing *The Phenomenology*. Hegel asks himself how it is that he comes to think the thoughts he is thinking at that particular time and place. His answer, according to Kojève, is that he can do so because of what Kant did, *and* because he is embedded in the particular moment in world history. For the Orthodox Marxist, what Hegel neglects in this self-comprehension is that he is first, and fundamentally, of a particular class. No matter what he thinks or does, that is the horizon beyond which he cannot see. The only possibility of seeing beyond that horizon is in the consciousness of the proletariat, and the proletarian revolution.

Lukács' resistance to this argument takes different forms. Although *History and Class Consciousness* is central, *The Young Hegel: Studies in the Relations Between Dialectics and Economics* of 1938 can be seen as an attempt to pursue and fulfill certain implications of the earlier work. In the Introduction to *The Young Hegel*, Lukács argues that the rejection of philosophy by Orthodox Marxism relies to heavily on a bourgeois view of the autonomy of the history of philosophy that was originated, ironically, by Hegel himself. That is to say, the rejection of bourgeois philosophy by Orthodox Marxism derives from confusing philosophy with a bourgeois representation of it as autonomous. This incorrect representation of the autonomy of philosophy is given an extreme turn by Schopenhauer and the neo-Kantian tradition. Lukács identifies this as taking hold after 1848 and it signals a return to the Kantian, rather than Hegelian, understanding of what philosophy should be

about.[43] Lukács does not confront Hegel head on, but argues against Marx, that material reality *does* manifest itself in Hegel's system because his philosophy was a response to reified experience. Hegel did not understand what reification was, but because of the way Hegel's philosophy configures itself in response to reification, the shape of his philosophy testifies to its unacknowledged presence. Thus, the problems of bourgeois philosophy are symptoms of trying to understand experience when they do not understand that it is always already reified. Thus Lukács writes,

> ...man in capitalist society confronts 'reality' made by himself (as a class) which appears to him to be a natural phenomenon alien to himself; he is wholly at the mercy of its 'laws', his activity is confined to the exploitation of the inexorable fulfillment of certain individual laws of his own (egotistic) interests. But even while 'acting' he remains, in the nature of the case, the object and not the subject of events. The field of his activity thus becomes wholly internalized: it consists on the one hand of the awareness of the laws which he uses and, on the other, of his awareness of his inner reactions to the course taken by events.[44]

What we need to appreciate here is the similarity between Lukács' metacritique of bourgeois philosophy as a whole, and Hegel's metacritique of Kant. Hegel criticized Kant because he did not appreciate the significance of the "knowing of knowing". This meant that no matter how long and hard Kant thought, his activity as a philosopher was only ever reason 'idling'. Reason was never deployed by Kant in such a way as to understood the meaning of its own activity. What Lukács might be said to be doing is moving the brackets which limited Kant, not as Hegel did, to the necessity of "knowing knowing", but to the necessity of "knowing reified knowing." Since reified experience is a mode of thinking which is man

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[43] Lukács says that

> Schopenhauer's approach to philosophy is rooted in his conviction that the efforts of Fichte, Schelling and Hegel to resolve Kant's contradictions were nothing but *aberrations*. According to Schopenhauer, philosophy should revert to the only correct method, that of Kant; anything else was deception, idle talk, a swindle.

Georg Lukács, *The Young Hegel: Studies in the Relations between Dialectics and Economics*, trans. R. Livingstone, (London: Merlin, 1975), pp. xv-xvi.

[44] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 135.

made, it cannot simply be *thought* beyond, as Hegel understood Kant's problem could be. Rather, reification must be undone at its source, in the process of production through the revolution of the proletariat.

Problems with Lukács

In his development of a more plausible reading of the relevance of bourgeois philosophy for Marxism, Lukács goes some way to resolving the contradictions inherent in his own identity as a Marxist thinker. Marx's own position as a philosopher is basically contradictory in the sense that his own argument undermines the potential usefulness of theoretical activity. Lukács attempts to remove this contradiction, when he defines the consciousness of the proletariat as potentially immune to reification. It is only the bourgeoisie who suffer from the reification of consciousness. In this scenario it is the role of the Party to act as a bridge between the diagnosis of reification and the proletarian revolution. Lukács is too sophisticated to posit this proletarian immunity to reification as already existing and, as Buck-Morss has pointed out, to get around the problem he makes a distinction between the "empirical" and "imputed" consciousness of the proletariat. "Empirical" consciousness refers to the existing consciousness of the proletariat, but "imputed" consciousness is what the proletariat would think, if they had an accurate awareness of their position. Although Lukács' argument represents an extraordinary refining of Orthodox Marxism, it still retains a strong element of Orthodoxy. He remains committed to the Marxist principle that it is only through the revolution of the proletariat, and the subsequent transformation of economic relations, that the reification of consciousness will be overcome. Lukács remains committed to the truth that the organization of material reality by capitalism produces consciousness. As Arato and

Breines have argued, this creates a new series of problematic implications for Lukács' brand of Marxism:

> Not finding any elements or traces of possible emancipation in the various spheres of the social world, he was not only drastically confined to the Marxist answer that the proletarian revolution will dissolve the dynamic center of reification, the factory based capitalist economy, but he was also forced into a dramatically mythological version of proletarian subjectivity...he could not (and, of course, did not want to) squeeze any element of potential subjectivity and creativity or even dynamic possibility out of law, science, bureaucracy, technology. As a result the theoretical burden on the revolutionary proletariat became impossibly great.[45]

Reification and Adorno

Despite its suggestiveness then, there remain serious difficulties with Lukács theory of reification. Even so, for Adorno, the significance of the argument is profound. Adorno acknowledges that "Lukács became the first dialectical materialist to apply the category of reification systematically to philosophy."[46] The most obvious contrast between Lukács and Adorno in the deployment of reification is their different understanding of its scope. As Buck-Morss has noted, for Lukács, reification is a specifically bourgeois problem.[47] For Adorno, reification is literally all-consuming; the proletariat are not immune. Lukács cannot accept this prognosis because it would be to abandon hope, signaling the absolute impossibility for any idea of revolutionary activity. To begin to explain how Adorno negotiates the crisis implicit in his skeptical reconfiguration of Lukács' position, we need to reconsider an alternative critical trajectory implicit in Lukács' critique of Hegel. That all previous philosophical attempts to represent experience have failed is, for Lukács, symptomatic of their misrepresentation of the problem of knowing experience as susceptible

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[45] Arato & Breines, *The Young Lukács and the Origins of Western Marxism*, p. 122.
[46] Theodor Adorno, "Reconciliation under Duress" in Ronald Taylor (ed.), *Aesthetics and Politics*, (London: Verso, 1980), p. 151.
[47] Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, p. 46.

to rational rather than social formulation. Reification is a mode of experience of the world which is made by capitalism.

The key to recognizing the difference between Lukács and Adorno is to return again to Merleau-Ponty's idea of Hegel's "expanded reason", and consider the different ways Lukács and Adorno locate the "irrational" in the light of Hegel's failure. Certain key passages in the second part of "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," before Lukács makes his commitment to the proletariat, signal an attitude to Hegel from which the different positions of Lukács and Adorno can both still emerge.

Lukács begins the section with a discussion of some of the symptoms of reification in bourgeois philosophy. His metacritical intentions are quite explicit:

> We wish only to sketch the *connection* between the fundamental problems of this philosophy and the *basis in existence* from which these problems spring and to which they strive to return by the road of the understanding. However, the character of this existence is revealed at least as clearly by what philosophy does *not* find problematic as by what it does. At any rate it is advisable to consider the interaction between these two aspects.[48]

For example, Lukács seeks to reveal how reification, which bourgeois philosophy does not find problematic, surfaces in the assumptions and structures of that philosophy. Lukács sees Kant's philosophy as grasping the man-made nature of experience, but not fully understanding that experience is made by capitalism. Thus "[Kant] refuses to accept the world as something that has arisen (or e.g. has been created by God) independently of the knowing subject, and prefers to conceive of it as it instead as its own product."[49] Another symptom of bourgeois philosophy's incomplete confrontation with reification "is the equation...of formal, mathematical, rational knowledge both with knowledge in general and also with 'our' knowledge." Against this totalizing view of reason under reification, Lukács

[48] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 112.
[49] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 111.

argues that the understanding of the scope and function of reason has changed through history.

> ...rationalism has existed at widely different times and in the most diverse forms, in the sense of a formal system whose unity derives from its orientation towards that aspect of the phenomena that can be grasped by the understanding, that is created by the understanding and hence also subject to the control, the predictions and the calculations of the understanding. But there are fundamental distinctions to be made, depending on the *material* on which rationalism is brought to bear and on the *role* assigned to it in the comprehensive system of human knowledge and human objectives. What is novel about modern rationalism is its increasingly insistent claim that it has discovered the *principle* which connects up all phenomena which in nature and society are found to confront mankind. Compared with this, every previous type of rationalism is no more than a partial system.[50]

This is to argue that the insufficiency of reason may be calamitous for Kant's and Hegel's mode of philosophizing which stands or falls on the sufficiency of reason, but, if history is anything to go by, reason can still survive if it is understood a "partial system" where the "ultimate" problems of human existence are understood as persisting "...in an irrationality incommensurable with human understanding."[51] Thus he writes

> ...it will not do to regard 'rationalism' as something abstract and formal and so turn it into a supra-historical principle inherent in the nature of human thought. We perceive rather that whether the form is to be treated as a universal category or merely as a way of delimiting precisely limited partial systems is essentially a *qualitative* problem. Nevertheless even the purely formal delimitation of this type throws light on the necessary correlation of the rational and the irrational, i.e. on the inevitability with which every rational system will strike a frontier or barrier of irrationality.[52]

Lukács now goes on to relate this claim about the exaggerated role of reason bourgeois philosophy to the different ways the barrier of the "irrational" is confronted in Kant and Hegel. The question is, can the barrier of irrationality, represented by Kant's "thing-in-itself" be further rationally resolved.

> ...when the problem of rationality resolves itself into the impossibility of resolving itself into any datum with the aid of rational concepts or of deriving

[50] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 113.
[51] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 113.
[52] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 114.

> from them such concepts, the question of the thing-in-itself, which at first seemed to involve the metaphysical dilemma of the relation between 'mind' and 'matter' now assumes a completely different aspect which is crucial both for methodology and for systematic theory. The question then becomes: are the empirical facts - (it is immaterial whether they are purely 'sensuous' or whether that sensuousness is only the ultimate material substratum of their 'factual' essence) - to be taken as 'given' or can this 'givenness' be dissolved further into rational forms, i.e. can it be conceived as the product of 'our' reason? With this the problem becomes crucial for the system in general.[53]

Lukács considers that the *Critique of Judgement* and Hegel's system both respond to the problem of "thing-in-itself". The *Critique of Judgement* takes it as "given", Hegel's system asserts that it can be "dissolved further into rational forms". Lukács notes that Kant

> ...repeatedly emphasizes that that pure reason is unable to make the last leap towards synthesis and the definition of an object and so its principles cannot be deduced 'directly of concepts but only indirectly by relating these concepts to something wholly contingent, namely *possible* experience.' In the *Critique of Judgement* this notion of 'intelligible contingency' both of the elements of possible experience and of all the laws regulating to it is made the central problem of systematization.[54]

That is to say, in Kant, the problem of the "thing-in-itself" as a barrier to reason becomes the question for *aesthetics*. This is not to see the *Critique of Judgement* in a narrow sense as an attempt to delineate the distinctiveness of aesthetic experience. Rather, it is to read it as a way of dealing with the ultimate inadequacy of pure reason, in its efforts to confront the "irrational". Kant's aesthetics come to be seen as an exploration of a more integrative comprehension of the "irrational" than reason would appear to allow.

Immediately following this explanation of the *Critique of Judgement*, Lukács proceeds to discuss Hegel as dealing with exactly the same problem. That is to say, like the *Critique of Judgement*, Hegel's system can be read as attempting to explain "intelligible contingency" . The fundamental distinction which separates Hegel's system from Kant's *Critique of Judgement* is that, for Kant, "intelligible contingency" remains *possible*

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[53] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 116.
[54] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 116.

experience, where, for Hegel, "intelligible contingency" consists of the mediations pertaining to the experience of the particular phenomenon. As such, in Kant, the "thing-in-itself" remains, as Lukács puts it, "given". Where, for Hegel, an "expanded reason" dissolves that "givenness" "further into rational forms." At this point, before looking at Lukács' critique of Hegel, we need to take stock.

The idea of "intelligible contingency" can provisionally be identified with the idea of the "irrational" in Merleau-Ponty's sense. It has been emphasized that one of the most basic differences between Kant and Hegel is that the former sees experience as an unchanging complex, while the latter sees it as changing through history. For Kant, the irrational is everything that is beyond an inflexible, universal reason. For Hegel, the task of philosophy was to demonstrate that the irrational was simply the appearance of phenomena, whose rational mediations had not been fully revealed. It follows that Hegel believes and shows that the "irrational" can be grasped more thoroughly by reason than Kant allows. Put another way, Hegel believed he could think the contingent more thoroughly than Kant, which is to say, for Hegel, the irrational is far more permeable to reason than Kant allowed. One obvious function of this is that for Hegel art and the aesthetic become obsolete in the face of the success of reason.

How then does Hegel's philosophy claim to rationally permeate the "irrational"? Lukács says that Hegel's necessary mode of procedure is to develop a system which will account for all the mediations of particular phenomena. So

> ...the attempt to universalize rationalism necessarily issues in the demand for a system but, at the same time, as soon as one reflects upon the conditions in which a universal system is possible, i.e. as soon as the question of the system is consciously posed, it is seen to be a demand incapable of fulfillment. For a system in the sense given to it by rationalism - and any other system would be self-contradictory - can bear no meaning other than that of a co-ordination, or

> rather supra- and subordination of the various partial systems of forms (and within these, of the individual forms).[55]

This implies that

> ... the paradox and the tragedy of classical German philosophy lie in the fact that... while grasping and holding on to the irrational character of the actual content of the concepts it strives to go beyond this, to overcome it and to erect a system. But from what has already been said it is clear what the problem of the actually given means for rationalism: vis. that it cannot be left to its own being and existence, for in that case it would remain ineluctably 'contingent.' Instead it must be wholly absorbed into the rational system of the concepts of the understanding.[56]

Lukács' point is that if it is assumed, against Kant, that the "givenness" of the "thing-in-itself" can be "dissolved into further rational forms" then a rational system is the necessary consequence. Repeating Marx's critique of Hegel, such a system will simply assimilate the irrational to reason. At this point Lukács is setting himself for what was described earlier as his 'out Hegeling' Hegel. Lukács argues that reason has reached its limit. In the present, to know reified knowing, we must attack the basis for reified knowing, which is capitalism, because reified knowing has been *made* by Capitalism. Lukács sees the consequence of reification as a situation where the capitalist organization of the economy creates a "second" reality which serves to obscure "reality itself". For Adorno, reification also sets up a "second" reality, but this does not obscure some post-revolutionary "reality" behind or beyond it. Rather, reification obscures the nonidentical character of particular phenomena. Reification creates and feeds the illusion of a non-contradictory reality where the dynamic of experience is transformed into a simplified positivist understanding of a transparent, and hence unproblematic, relationship between consciousness' representations of the world, and a world immediately available to it.

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[55] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 116-117.
[56] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 117-118.

This is a subtle but absolutely basic difference between Adorno and Lukács. Adorno takes Lukács argument on board but, for Adorno, the failure of philosophy is not just its failure to know itself as reified, but also in the inadequacy of philosophical concepts themselves. Philosophy is mediated by reification, but it is not completely explained by reification. To over-emphasize the inability of philosophy to understand itself as a function of reification, would be to do what Lukács does, and imply the ultimate irrelevance of philosophy. On the other hand, to emphasize the inadequacy of philosophical concepts as a valid explanation for the failure of philosophy would be to imply the absolute autonomy of philosophy. Each explanation for the failure of philosophy signals the inevitable failure to know. Neither explanation for the failure of philosophy must come to exclude the other. For Adorno, neither recognizes that the "irrational" can only be represented by a philosophical form which itself is a complex mediation of the philosophical concept and the irrational *within* it. Lukács shows this, but does not develop its implications. The symptoms of reification in Kant and Hegel appear in the form their philosophy takes and, as such, *indirectly represent* reification. The irrational persists in the form philosophical argument takes. This persistence of the irrational in the form of philosophical systematics is the key to Adorno's continued commitment to philosophy. For him, the task is the philosophical attempt to represent the concrete particular in the most succinctly rational way possible, which is to describe it in its complex contingency. This generates philosophical form which indirectly represents the world. Once reason is given a partial rather than sufficient role, as it is in *Aesthetic Theory,* is that, in Lukács words,

> ...we are forced to concede that actuality, content, matter reaches right into form, the structures of the forms and their interrelations and thus, *into the structure of the system itself.* In that case the system must be abandoned as a system. For then it will be no more than a register, an account, as well ordered as possible, of facts which are no longer linked rationally and so can no longer

> be made systematic even though the forms of their components are themselves rational.[57]

The collapsing system of *Aesthetic Theory* collapses in giving itself to the particular, while acknowledging there will always also be an unexplained remainder. In this sense *Aesthetic Theory* can be thought of as engaging this description of the complex relationship between Kant's aesthetics and Hegel's system. Adorno is committed to attempt a relatively *late* resort to the "irrational". That is to say, in the light of Hegel's failure, the problem of the "thing-in-itself" remains a problem, but it can be thought into, while still leaving a remnant. The claim I am making for *Aesthetic Theory*, is that it can be thought of as a kind of 'aestheticization' of Hegel's system, in its commitment to understanding the mediations of the particular phenomenon while rejecting the final adequacy of reason. Where the integrative comprehension of Kant's aesthetics remains aloof because of its universality, the integrative comprehension of reason in *Aesthetic Theory* moves so far towards the particular object that it is itself on the point of collapse. The strategic importance of *Aesthetic Theory* is that it is capable of thinking through the "irrational" and contingent, much further than the Kantian paradigm allows. This is a big claim for *Aesthetic Theory*. There are two basically different reasons why it is difficult to substantiate.

First, there is an objective problem. Is it actually possible to read a collapsing philosophical system whose, to use Lukács words, "facts are no longer linked rationally and so can no longer be made systematic?" Second, this task, should it be possible, is infinitely complicated by the fact that philosophical form is the issue. As was suggested in the Introduction, the way philosophical form can be thought has, to a great extent, been defined by a tradition from Nietzsche, Heidegger and Deconstruction. This tradition has tended to emphasize philosophical anti-from as "poetic" or "literary". Even in the work of Derrida, who

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[57] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 118.

operates with an expanded idea of the "literary," the direction of his argument arises out of a radically different context from Adorno. To make an important generalization, the Heidegger/Derrida axis is closely related to Lukács, in as much as it locates the irrational as trans-conceptual, beyond rational thinking, the unthought. Adorno, uniquely, is committed to thematizing the nonidentical as a thoroughgoing commitment to reason despite, and because of, its acknowledged inadequacy.

There are close parallels between Adorno and the Heidegger/Derrida tradition, but as I have indicated, these can be intensely misleading for the reception of *Aesthetic Theory*. One of the most important differences, which is a persistent, though not dominant theme in the following chapter, concerns the possibility of reading. Adorno's commitment to rational thought configures the problem of understanding *Aesthetic Theory* very differently, from the problem of understanding, as it surfaces in the reception of Heidegger and Derrida. Accordingly the following chapter discusses the problem of philosophical form, as raised by Heidegger and Deconstruction, and considers terms on which it might be possible to read the form of *Aesthetic Theory* outwith that tradition.

Chapter III

PHILOSOPHICAL FORM AND LITERARY FORM

When philosophy reflects on its form, one way of doing so has been to think of itself as language. Philosophy then compares itself with other ways language is deployed. The most obvious non-philosophical languages are 'poetic' and every-day language. Thus, philosophy which is self-conscious of its form, has often defined itself in relation to either poetry, or to every day language, or to both. The great exception is Hegel. The first attempt to emphasize systematically the inseparability of philosophical form and content, the form Hegel's philosophy takes is a function of his response to previous philosophy, not other modes of language. In this sense, Hegel is the point of departure for any discussion of philosophical form that does not explain itself first and foremost as language.

One reason why Hegel is so troubling for philosophy is that he emphasizes the sufficiency of reason, while emphasizing the insufficiency of the idea of the isolated philosophical judgement. In other words, his prognosis for philosophy is both ultimately reassuring and extremely worrying. It is reassuring because philosophy can be successful, worrying because it cannot be successful by traditional and obvious means. The "gap" Hegel proposes between the idea of the discrete judgement and the sufficiency of reason is here occupied by Hegel's philosophical "form". Now, just because this form is not thought of by Hegel as determined by language, this does not mean it has no relation to poetic or every-day language. Hegel wrote extensively on poetry and indeed, the arts in general. Nonetheless, his *Aesthetics* is one part of his system, and his philosophy sustains its identity as form in a way which does not obviously owe anything to his theory of art.

Kant, by contrast, as we have seen, did not self-consciously reflect on the potential meaning of the form of his philosophy. At the same time, Kant's *Critique of Judgement* had a huge impact, being instrumental in establishing aesthetics as a legitimate branch of philosophy. This impact was not purely a function of what the *Critique of Judgement* is in itself. There is also the implication that aesthetic experience might somehow compensate for the potential inadequacies of reason, as diagnosed in the *Critique of Pure Reason.* In this sense, Kant's philosophy as a whole established an ambiance which was sympathetic for the reception of his aesthetics. This sympathetic ambiance holds for Kant's aesthetics a potentially more significant impact than Hegel's aesthetics can have within his rationally sufficient philosophy.

What works against this prognosis of the relative significance of the "aesthetic" in Kant and Hegel is that, although Hegel's *Aesthetics* is just one part of his system, art is characterized as essentially continuous with rational thinking. Art and philosophy are both understood as forms of experiencing and representing the world. Thus, despite Hegel's emphasis on their differences, they are ultimately continuous. It is because philosophy and art are so thoroughly understood a process of experiencing and representing the world that, on Hegel's terms at least, his philosophical practice is far closer to art than is Kant's.

It is one consequence of their systematically different strategies that there are major complications for any attempt to compare the arguments of Kant and Hegel. Each defines "the arts" differently, and configures itself differently in relation to them. This "configuration" is multifaceted, and takes place according to the way each philosopher understands what it is about "the arts" that makes them similar to, or different from, itself. For Kant, reason and the aesthetic are modes of *experience*. For Hegel, philosophy and art are modes of *experience* and *representation.* To compare Kant and Hegel on a specific issue inevitably means erasing

incompatibilities. This would be either to read Kant on Hegel's terms (or vice versa), or, as did Lukács, to develop a meta-critical position, capable of containing their incompatibilities within some over-riding common determination of their thought.

So, on Kant's terms, the *Critique of Judgement* is about the analysis and description of different kinds of experience. From Hegel's perspective, Kant does not understand the importance of the different "forms" through which experience represents the world to consciousness, and therefore neglects to discriminate between them. Adorno, siding with Hegel in this instance, makes this point in the following way:

> Kant states at the start of the 'Analytic of the Beautiful' that the first moment of a judgement of taste is disinterested satisfaction, where interest is defined as 'the satisfaction which we combine with the representation of the existence of an object.' Right away there is an ambiguity. It is impossible to tell whether Kant means, by representation of the existence of an object, the empirical object dealt with in a work of art, in other words its subject matter or content, or whether he means the work of art itself.[1]

Adorno's point has nothing to do with a critique of Kant's idea of "disinterestedness". Rather, for Hegel and Adorno, experience cannot be understood if thought of as detached, i.e. "abstracted" from the means of its representation. In this instance, Adorno concludes that Kant is trying to describe aesthetic experience, without distinguishing between the experiential relationship between the work of art and the world and the experiential relation pertaining between the viewer and the work of art. For Hegel and Adorno, the form an experience takes thoroughly mediates the capacity of that experience to represent. Thus, for example, when Hegel writes in the Introduction to *Aesthetics* that art is an incomplete representation of the world, it is on the basis that

> neither in content nor in form is art the highest and absolute mode of bringing to our minds the true interests of the spirit. For precisely on account of its form, art is limited to a specific content. Only one sphere and stage of truth is capable of being represented in the element of art.[2]

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[1] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 14.
[2] G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, vol. 1, trans. T.M. Knox, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) p.9.

A fundamental difference between *The Critique of Judgement* and Hegel's *Aesthetics,* then, is that the former does not pay attention to the medium of representation. This difference between Kant and Hegel, and Adorno's identification with Hegel on the issue, is fundamental to *Aesthetic Theory.* It can also suggest why the form Kant's and Hegel's aesthetics take are so very different. One of the differences is scale. The translation of Hegel's *Aesthetics* is in two volumes and runs to over 1,000 pages. It describes the history of art from ancient to romantic art. The *Critique of Judgement* is minute by comparison, though its claims aspire to universality. Moreover, Kant spends most of the time discussing the experience of the beauty of nature, a subject which, Hegel tells us in the Introduction to his *Aesthetics*, he is not going to deal with. As was mentioned earlier, the impact of the *Critique of Judgement* did much to establish the legitimacy of aesthetics as a branch of philosophy, while Hegel's *Aesthetics* has been almost completely neglected. The impact of Hegel's *Aesthetics* it to be found rather in the discipline of art history, where he has been described by Gombrich, for one, as the "father" of the discipline.

Moreover, it could be argued that Kant's "oversight", as diagnosed by Adorno above, is indispensable, if he is to maintain the integrity of his identity as a philosopher. To make the hard distinction between the representation of experience to consciousness and the representation of experience by the work of art, is to make representation, as well as experience, an issue for aesthetics. "The arts" so manifestly represent the world in such different ways, and each art has represented in different ways through its history, that an aesthetics which makes representation an issue must, of necessity, become historically orientated towards the arts. Equally, as Adorno argues at the beginning of Chapter 4 of *Aesthetic Theory*, an aesthetics preoccupied by representation will be predisposed to show correspondingly little interest in nature vis. Hegel's *Aesthetics.*

Now, despite the enormous range and historical scope of Hegel's aesthetics, art remains contained by philosophy in his system. The containing "device" is his absolute conviction that the way philosophy experiences and represents is more advanced than the way the arts experience and represent. For Hegel, the relative inferiority of the arts is that they experience the world "imaginatively," not dialectically, and are thus unable to represent the world as such. Philosophy, which does experience the world dialectically, represents it accordingly and, for Hegel, this is how the world is.

There are other ways to think of the differences between the aesthetics of Kant and Hegel. What needs emphasizing here, if we are better to understand *Aesthetic Theory*, are two things: first, there is the specific criticism of Kant's failure to differentiate between different forms of representation of experience in his aesthetics, and second, there is the general claim that the way the problem of aesthetics is framed by philosophy is a function of how philosophy understands itself. For the moment I will leave the specific criticism of Kant aside and concentrate instead on the wider issue of the relation between philosophical self-understanding, and philosophical questions.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the revelation of the unconsciously held assumptions in a philosopher is the basis for meta-critique. This is a central dynamic in the history of philosophy from Kant onwards. As Lukács puts it, "classical philosophy [i.e., Kant and Hegel] mercilessly tore to shreds all the metaphysical illusions of the preceding era, but was forced to be as uncritical and as dogmatically metaphysical with regard to some of its won premises as its predecessors had been towards theirs."[3] Lukács, in other words, does to Kant and Hegel what they did to their predecessors. As we have seen, Lukács' critique of Hegel is that, despite himself, he like Kant, "takes for granted certain ideas." For Lukács it is

[3] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 121.

"...the - dogmatic - assumption that the rational and formalistic mode of cognition is the only possible way of apprehending reality..."[4] What Lukács is not saying is that Kant and Hegel did not deal with other modes of apprehending reality in, for example, the *Critique of Judgement* or Hegel's *Aesthetics*. What he is saying is that the presupposition "that the rational and formalistic mode of cognition is the only possible way of apprehending reality," thoroughly permeates their attitude towards these non-philosophical modes of apprehending reality.

Now, metacritique, deployed as much by Kant and Hegel as by Lukács, if carried out with sufficient insight and rigor, does indeed, "tear to shreds" its target. It is so destructive because it takes on a whole system of thought through the critique of its premises. Those premises are not isolated from the system of thought, but revealed as thoroughly permeating all its aspects. Indeed one could say that it is precisely because Kant and Hegel were so logical, that they were so vulnerable to metacritique.

The importance of Lukács' argument is not that it thus 'saw through' Kant and Hegel. Virtually every subsequent thinker has done so in one way or another. Rather, what is key is his claim that the permeation of a philosophical argument by its premises can be read as revealing of the world. As Lukács writes "the character of existence is revealed at least as clearly by what philosophy does *not* find problematic as by what it does."[5] On Lukács' terms, however, philosophy can thus only *reveal* experience as reified. Moreover, its capacity to thus reveal is contingent on its metacritical *reading*. This metacritical reading is an early step in the revolutionary process. On his own terms, however, Lukács the philosopher cannot complete the revolution. This is because, as a means of representing the world, capitalism is not simply a way of thinking, but a material entity which has been *made*. It cannot be

[4] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 117.
[5] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 112.

unthought by philosophical metacritique. Rather, capitalism has to be unmade at the site of its production, by the proletariat, who are in the position to do so. When this has been done, then the world can be experienced as it really is. As was argued in the previous chapter, Adorno here parts company with Lukács' argument, after the point where he defines and diagnoses the significance of the revelatory capacity of philosophical argument.

The significance of Lukács' argument for reading Adorno is that in it we have a preliminary definition of philosophical form, and a suggestion of its significance as an indirect means of representing the world. A passage from *Negative Dialectics* helps tease out some of the implications of this insight. Adorno is comparing the different function of "questions" in philosophy and the "special sciences":

> The weight of questions in philosophy differs indeed from the weight they have in the special sciences, where the solutions of questions removes them, while in philosophical history there rhythm would be more that of duration and oblivion.[6]

Adorno posits that philosophical questions do not simply exist as problems which can or cannot be solved. Rather, such questions have a "rhythm...of duration and oblivion." The process of solving a problem, or demonstrating its irrelevance, is duration. This duration is the "rhythm" of that question, as its implications permeate ensuing argument, limiting its possibilities. With this idea of philosophical rhythm, we can return to Hegel's idea of the form of philosophy. Earlier it was characterized as the "gap" between the inadequacy of the idea of the discrete judgement and the sufficiency of reason. This is most self-evidently identified as Hegel's dialectic: the relentless "thesis", "antithesis", "synthesis" of Hegel's thought. Implied by this step-by-step progress is the principle of complicity, or determination, between the different claims Hegel makes, which give his system its internal coherence. As Lukács puts it, "every given aspect of the system should be capable of being deduced from its basic

[6] T.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973) p. 63.

principle."[7] As we saw, a related determinateness can be *read* into Kant's arguments. Kant, however, according to Hegel "takes for granted certain ideas".[8] In other words, he is not totally explicit, making unphilosophical assumptions. Now, as we have seen, Hegel can likewise be read metacritically. The crucial difference between Kant and Hegel, however, is that Hegel seeks to make the integrity of his premises and his specific claims, completely explicit. That is to say, Hegel seeks to make every reading of his argument always already a metacritique. Now, as we have seen, Lukács is not interested in this aspect of Hegel's difference from Kant. For Lukács, Kant and Hegel are just different examples of how the failure to recognize reification manifests itself through philosophical premises and the working out of their implications in argument. Adorno, by contrast is interested in the difference between Kant and Hegel. This difference is Hegel's *attempt* to make explicit the relatedness of his premises to the detailed claims they generate. This makes Hegel's philosophy a paradigm of philosophy which self-consciously understands the representational significance of seeking to make that explicit that which is revealed by metacritical reading.

At one level, *Aesthetic Theory* can be thought of as a response to Hegel's *Aesthetics*. It responds to Hegel's *Aesthetics* in the light of what has been widely recognised as its philosophical over-determination of art. Hegel's attempt to demonstrate the sufficiency of reason permeates his *Aesthetics*. Consider some of the different ways in which Hegel's *Aesthetics* is consistent with its premise: art is dead; philosophy is alive; the medium of art is the imagination; the medium of philosophy is reason; art is an incomplete representation of the world; philosophy is complete. It is the logical integrity of Hegel's philosophy of art that makes it, on Lukács' and Adorno's terms, an indirect representation of the world. At the

[7] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 117.
[8] G.W.F.Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V.Miller, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 47.

same time, it is precisely this logical integrity that makes Hegel's *Aesthetics* a rationally over-determined representation of art.

When Adorno rejects the sufficiency of reason in *Aesthetic Theory* he destroys the systematic integrity of Hegel's *Aesthetics*. This creates two inseparable problems. First, in *Aesthetic Theory* none of Hegel's distinctions between art and philosophy hold. As we have seen, Adorno is also adamant that the medium through which experience is represented to consciousness defines it. This means that, despite Adorno's rejection of the basis for Hegel's distinction between philosophy and art, he is committed to their distinctness. Second, it is exactly the explicit systematic unity of Hegel's philosophy which gives it the capacity indirectly to represent the world. In rejecting the sufficiency of reason *qua* systematic unity, Adorno would appear to be destroying the means by which philosophy indirectly represents the world.

This provides some indication of the problems *Aesthetic Theory* confronts. In themselves they are daunting, but the reception of *Aesthetic Theory* is radically complicated, as already signalled in the Introduction and Chapter 1, by the ambience of poststructuralism. In this tradition, the whole question of philosophical form has surfaced not through an extrapolation of the implications of the internal collapse of Hegel's rational philosophical form, but from deconstruction's emphasis on philosophy as, first and foremost, language. As we saw in the Introduction, the question of how to read Adorno, as framed by Jameson's book and the various responses to it, is permeated by the question of the relation of the philosophical and the literary. Furthermore, this discussion has tended to establish an unhelpful distinction between Adorno's "philosophical" truth claims and the "literary" form of his argument. These tendencies are directly traceable to the way poststructuralism has configured the possibility of thinking about philosophical form. Heidegger, whose profound

influence on poststructuralism derives principally through Derrida's reading and appropriation of him, produced work which shuns the adequacy of philosophical judgement. It should be evident that Adorno's notion of philosophical form, if in crisis in *Aesthetic Theory*, is predicated on the deployment of the philosophically rigorous judgement. The interrupted philosophical rhythm of *Aesthetic Theory* is, I will argue, definitively different from a superficially similar, anti-philosophical tendency identified with Heidegger and Derrida. The problem is to define how, and why, this is the case. It is from this difference that a whole series of incompatibilities between Adorno and the tradition can be defined, and it is from this that the form of *Aesthetic Theory* can be understood on its own terms.

The purpose of the rest of this chapter, then, is to establish the grounds on which *Aesthetic Theory* is different from Deconstruction and the Heideggarian attitude to philosophical form. This will, by default, do something to suggest the strategic significance of *Aesthetic Theory* within the context of contemporary theory. In the next two sections my purpose is to establish the limited relevance of various available attitudes to reading philosophical form. I will consider how the conflict between poststructuralism and the analytical tradition has defined the parameters within which the relation between philosophy and form can be discussed. To begin with, we must establish the implications of the linguistic and literary origins of deconstruction. To this end, in the next section I will briefly recapitulate Derrida's critique of Saussure.

Saussure and Derrida

Deconstruction is a way of thinking which has arisen out of literary criticism. It explicitly challenges the idea of a significant difference between the literary work of art and the ostensibly objective critical act. Christopher Norris describes it in the following manner:

> Deconstruction is the active antithesis of everything that criticism ought to be if one accepts its traditional values and concepts. Beneath the age old conflicts of critical method there has always existed a tacit agreement about certain conventions or rules of debate, with which (supposedly) no serious thinking about literature could be carried out.[9]

The "method" of deconstruction has been to expose those conventions which ostensibly lend objectivity to the critical act. These are then revealed as resting on no more secure a basis than the unashamedly fictional claims of the literary works criticism explains. One response to this mode of deconstruction has been to understand it as a means of locating implicit structures in literary works. These can then be thought of as previously submerged levels of meaning, beyond what has traditionally been read. According to Norris, Johnathan Culler is one such critic. Culler relocates the meaning of a text from its explicit content to implicit structure and, in so doing, assumes that

> structures of meaning correspond to some deep-laid mental 'set' or pattern of mind which determines the limits of intelligibility. Theory, from Culler's point of view, would be to search for invariant structures or formal universals which reflect the very nature of human intelligence.[10]

Thus, although Culler makes use of the practice of deconstructive reading, he relocates the center of critical objectivity to a new level. Norris identifies this idea of criticism as "a 'meta-language' set up to articulate the codes and conventions of all (existing or possible) literary texts",[11] and identifies it as the central aspiration of Barthes' early work. Against this "structuralist" tradition, Derrida signals a shift in several ways. First, he is less

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[9] Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, (London: Methuen, 1982), p. xii.
[10] Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, p. 3.
[11] Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, p. 4.

concerned with deconstructing the accepted difference between literature and criticism than with the supposed difference between literature and philosophy: "Derrida's attentions are therefore divided between 'literary' and 'philosophical' texts, a distinction which in practice he constantly breaks down and shows to be based on a deep but untenable prejudice";[12] and "Derrida refuses to grant philosophy the kind of privileged status it has always claimed as the sovereign dispenser of reason."[13] The second aspect of Derrida's difference from structuralism is his critique of structuralist claims to diagnose deep patterns of implicit meaning. For Norris, the focal point of this critique is Saussure's theory of structural linguistics, from which "Structuralism in all its manifold forms and applications developed..."[14]

Saussure had argued that there is not a guaranteed link between words and what they signify, rather the meaning of words is defined by their differences from each other. Saussure extrapolated two ideas from this insight:

> He argued, first, that linguistics could be placed on a scientific basis only by adopting a 'synchronic' approach, one that treated language as a network of structural relations existing at a given point in time... Second, Saussure found it necessary to make a firm distinction between the isolated speech act or utterance (*parole*) and the general system of articulate relations from which it derived (*la langue*).[15]

Derrida develops his critique of Saussure in the essay "Linguistics and Grammatology."[16] He diagnoses, and then questions, Saussure's presumption of "the relative priority of spoken as opposed to written language, a dualism Derrida locates at the heart of the Western philosophic tradition."[17] The basis for the distinction Derrida makes is that

> In speaking one is able to experience (supposedly) an intimate link between sound and sense, an inward and immediate realisation of meaning which yields

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[12] Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, p. 21.
[13] Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, p. 18.
[14] Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, p. 25.
[15] Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, p. 25.
[16] Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, p. 26.
[17] Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, p. 26.

> itself up without reserve to perfect, transparent understanding. Writing on the contrary, destroys this ideal of self-presence. It obtrudes an alien; depersonalised medium, a deceiving shadow which falls between intent and meaning, between utterance and understanding. It occupies a promiscuous public realm where authority is sacrificed to the vagaries and whims of textual 'dissemination.' Writing, in short, is a threat to the deeply traditional view that associates truth with self presence and the 'natural' language wherein it finds expression.[18]

Derrida's problem with Saussure is that the latter fails to distinguish between these essentially different implications for meaning of spoken and written language. Saussure assumes that language as a whole performs according to the parameters Derrida equates with its spoken form. In other words, Saussure's scientific aspirations for linguistics are based on a partial model of language, deriving from an extrapolation of the certainties of its spoken form onto writing.

The pattern of metacritique deployed by Derrida against philosophy is obviously part of a tradition of metacritique already delineated. Where Lukács, for example, identifies Kant and Hegel as having failed to recognize that experience was *produced* by capitalism, Derrida claims that philosophy has never understood itself to be conditioned by the medium of its expression, which is not "reason" as it was for Hegel, but writing. The meaning of writing, furthermore, in contrast to speech, is fluid. Written meaning is fluid because of its exposure to the contingencies of infinitely different receptions of written language. For Derrida, therefore, philosophy is a congenitally contradictory activity because its means of expression prohibit the fulfilling of its aspiration to be truthful.

Now, at this stage, it is important to recognize a strategic similarity between Adorno and Derrida. Adorno observed Kant's failure in the *Critique of Judgement* to discriminate between orders of representation. Derrida's critique of Saussure similarly emphasizes the former's failure to discriminate between speech and writing. At the same time, there is a

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[18] Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, p. 28.

fundamental difference. Adorno is deploying Hegel against Kant to argue that the medium through which experience is represented, cannot be separated from the content of that experience. Derrida claims the same thing of Saussure. Where Saussure had based his linguistics on thinking language as speech, and thereby emphasized the stability of meaning, Derrida does the opposite. He then makes writing, and thus the fluidity of meaning, the condition of experience. Adorno's point is that experiences cannot be reduced to a single necessary aspect of their identity. This is one of Adorno's *premises*, and as we have seen, it generates the fluidity of meaning. Thus, from Adorno's perspective, although Derrida is quite right about Saussure, he is not right to over-determine philosophy as writing; it is also other things. For Adorno, the fluidity of philosophical truth derives from the particular philosophical utterance's state as a complex mediation of many things. For Derrida, the fluidity of philosophy comes from being one thing - writing - and the meaning of writing is fluid.

This indication of a profound difference between Adorno and Derrida is very far from undermining what Derrida does nor, for the moment, is the aim to do so. Derrida is not as vulnerable to metacritique as Kant and Hegel because he is not as rational as they are. Furthermore, like Adorno's, much of Derrida's work can be thought of as an attempt to relocate meaning, rather than undermine it *per se*. What this preliminary indication of one difference between Adorno and Derrida is meant to indicate is that their *premises* about why philosophical meaning is fluid are fundamentally different, and are going to give their thinking radically different rhythms and directions.

With this idea in mind I will now consider, not these differences themselves, but the difficulty of doing so. This is because of the way deconstruction constructs the possibilities for thinking philosophical form, and its dominance of the discussion of the issue. It should be

emphasized that this is not a complaint about the power of poststructuralism in general. Its power is, in any case, unevenly distributed. Rather, poststructuralism has raised the issue of philosophical form and, to that extent, contributed to an intellectual climate which should be sympathetic to the reception of *Aesthetic Theory*. That it is not, is because the philosophical form of *Aesthetic Theory* is of a different order from that anticipated by poststructuralism and one of its main targets, the analytical tradition of philosophy.

Philosophical content and Literary form: Deconstruction and the Analytical tradition

It is because of Derrida's characterization of the inseparability of "philosophy" and "literature" that the analytical tradition has been confronted with the idea of its own form as "literary" form. Those who have responded to this aspect of the deconstructive challenge to analytical philosophy have come to the issue of philosophical form through the implication of its potentially "literary" qualities. Introducing the first part of his book *The Anatomy of Philosophical Style*, Berel Lang writes,

> The premise motivating the discussion... is that philosophy, however it is otherwise conceived , is also, perhaps even first, a form of writing. To the extent that this is true, moreover, the critical means that have been found relevant to more conventional "literary" texts can be - ought to be - also applied to philosophical writing, up to the point at least that the writing itself demonstrates its irrelevance.[19]

Since philosophy and literature are "first" writing, the issue concerning Lang is the *reception* of philosophical texts in the light of their similarity to the "literary" *qua* writing. His interest is generated by the wide-ranging dispute about the relative merits of ways of reading philosophy. This quarrel emerged from the clash between a philosophical tradition that has

[19] Berel Lang, *The Anatomy of Philosophical Style: Literary Philosophy and the Philosophy of Literature*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 2.

been peculiarly unreflective about the function of language in its procedures (apart from post-Wittgensteinian Analytic Philosophy) and a mode of argument which sees nothing beyond the "text". Lang introduces his project as a kind of modification of the way analytical philosophy thinks of itself

> ...in contrast to the Neutralist model in which the philosophical writer draws on an independent and supposedly "style-less" body of propositional assertions that the philosopher first discovers and then arranges or reformulates, the writer in this second model, in choosing a form or structure for philosophical discourse, is, *in that act*, also shaping the substance or content which the form then - very loosely speaking now - will be "of".[20]

This looks promising, if rather depressing. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* was published in 1807, Lang's book in 1990. When Lang looks at Hegel, and he only ever does in the form of brief comments, it is by bringing to bear literary ideas. Thus:

> Kant, for example, uses metaphors more often than similes, where with Plato the proportions are the other way round, and in both cases there is a relation between the literary figure used and the philosophical content - as there is also in Hegel, for whom any philosophically historical fragment will eventually disclose the whole: so his use of metonymy as a literary figure.[21]

Moreover,

> it seems to me more than merely whimsy to associate the causality of Hegel's *Phenomenology* - what motivates the discourse with a version of what we would otherwise recognise as the *Bildungsroman* in the narration of which the novice figure of *Geist* (spirit) after overcoming a number of serious adversities (for which, naturally, *Geist* itself is responsible) then realises its true nature and destiny. This is, after all, a standard pattern of what in literary history we recognise familiarly as the Romance.[22]

Now these are potentially interesting observations. What needs to be recognized is that they are rendered through the identification of philosophical form with literary form. Lang is writing a book called *The Anatomy of Philosophical Style*; at the beginning he tentatively mentions the possibility of a relation between philosophical form and content.

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[20] Berel Lang, *The Anatomy of Philosophical Style*, p. 18.
[21] Berel Lang, *The Anatomy of Philosophical Style*, p. 20.
[22] Berel Lang, *The Anatomy of Philosophical Style*, p. 21.

When he mentions the greatest exponent there has ever been of the idea of the inseparability of philosophical form and content, it is to suggest that we should pay attention to his deployment of literary tropes.

It is essentially the same paradigm which frames the argument exemplified by Danto's paper "Philosophy as/and/of Literature". Danto's point of departure is a consideration of the implications for analytical philosophy of its deconstructive *reading*. He writes of the analytical tradition,

> We take a remote satisfaction that some of us Strawson, Ryle, and Quine, let alone Santayana, Russell and James - write distinguished prose...Still our tendency is to regard style, save to the degree that it enhances perspicuity, as adventitious and superfluous to that for the sake of which we finally address these texts: as mere *Farbung*, to use Frege's dismissive term. So to rotate these texts in such a way that the secondary facets catch the light of intellectual concern puts what we regard as the primary facets in shadow; and to acquiesce in the concept of philosophy-as-literature just now seems tacitly to acquiesce to the view that the austere imperatives of philosophy-as-science have lost their energy. Considering what has been happening to texts when treated in recent times, our cannon seems suddenly fragile, and it pains the heart to think of them enduring the frivolous sadism of the deconstructionist.[23]

Like Lang, Danto frames his discussion of philosophical form in terms of the contrast between the philosophical and the literary, which is in essence a straight-forward dispute about the priority of different ways of *reading* philosophy. As he makes clear, the awareness of philosophical form in his tradition of practice is understood as supplementary, even secondary, by contrast with what is finally addressed by philosophical writing. Deconstruction is "frivolous" because it disregards the philosopher's intentions, deliberately amplifying "style" as an unacknowledged fluidity at the expense of primary, philosophical content. While one can understand Danto's problem, his argument is absolutely compatible with the parameters of deconstruction. He reinforces the distinctness of philosophical form

[23] Arthur Danto, "Philosophy as/and/of Literature", in Cascardi, (ed) *Literature and the Question of Philosophy*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 4.

from content, accepting philosophical form as identical with its metaphoricality. On this basis, he differentiates between traditional philosophical content and literary form.

From Danto's discussion a whole series of oppositions emerge. The following appear in the quotation above: primary facets v, secondary facets, perspicuity v, superfluity, style v, what is finally addressed, philosophy-as-literature v, philosophy-as-science, etc. These oppositions are interesting, as is Danto's argument and the scenario he is engaged in, but a pattern of confrontation embeds itself and restricts the field of conceivable relations between philosophy and form. From the analytical perspective, perspicuity is always the opposite of superfluous style; it is perspicuity which enables us to concentrate on what is finally addressed by philosophy. The disputed relation between philosophical reading and literary reading is always thought of in terms of the ambient requirement to hold them apart. Analytic philosophy and deconstruction share the premise that, at stake in their battle is which mode of reading will ultimately overcome the other. This is true even when Danto suggests an alternative way of thinking of philosophical form: "the form of philosophical truth and the form of philosophical expression are internally enough related that we may want to recognize that when we turn to other forms we may also be turning to other forms of philosophical truth",[24] or, further, "that philosophers with really new thoughts have simply had to invent new forms with which to convey them"[25]. These suggestions are not understood as being of a potentially different order from the paradigmatic split which permeates the argument.

Now, if the reception of deconstruction by analytical philosophy emphasizes the literary form of philosophy, it is also true to say that much of Derrida's work has been about a radical expansion of the idea of the "literary". His own position is certainly not equivalent to the way his perceived implications for analytical philosophy are developed by Lang and

[24] Arthur Danto, "Philosophy as/and/of Literature", p. 6.
[25] Arthur Danto, "Philosophy as/and/of Literature", p. 8.

Danto. So although the examples of Danto and Lang are important as examples of how the permutations of deconstruction channel philosophical consciousness of form, their perception of their own relation to language as philosophers is very different from Derrida's. It is in this more involved relationship between philosophical form and the "literary" that the extreme proximity of Adorno and Derrida begins to appear. The matrix out of which their proximity emerges is their closeness to Heidegger. Heidegger and Derrida are so similar in their difference from Adorno, that treating aspects of their positions as indistinguishable will serve to simplify the discussion of Adorno. The following analysis of Heidegger and Derrida will concentrate on defining their basic assumptions and the way these assumptions carry a rhythm through their arguments. This rhythm is understood as having ramifications for the way they can think of philosophical form and its relation to the literary or poetic in particular, and the arts in general. This, in turn, is inseparable from the question of their readability, i.e., whether it is ultimately possible to "make sense" of them.

Heidegger and Derrida

Heidegger is interested in how it is possible for meaning to take place at all. As George Steiner puts it in his discussion of Heidegger, the job of the philosopher is first and foremost "to be incessantly astonished at and focused on the fact that things *are*."[26] Before his "turn", *Dasein*, the ontological condition of 'being' in the world,' is the context for Heidegger's thinking about the possibility of thinking how things are. The problem, Heidegger argues, is that the basis for proper comprehension of what things are, and what it might mean to experience things as they really are, is not immediately available to consciousness. Rather, experience of the world is always obscured by established modes of

[26] Georg Steiner, *Heidegger*, (London: Penguin Modern Masters, 1978), p. 27.

representing the world, which are actually a 'forgetting of Being.' Established modes of representation represent the world according to our needs and desires, and therefore do not represent things as they are, or our relation to them. Once this idea is established, the task for Heidegger's thinking becomes one of transcending technologically modelled thinking. This might seem relatively straight-forward, until we grasp the *scope* of the 'forgetting of Being.' For Heidegger, this extends far beyond any traditional definitions of instrumental thinking, to include the whole tradition of Western philosophy and science.

After the "turn", there is a degree of consensus that language comes to be understood by Heidegger as the condition of meaning, i.e., there is no meaning "outside" language because there *is* no outside language. Language, in other words, takes on a transcendental status. Heidegger is obviously close to Derrida, and their closeness on this issue has been described as follows:

> Derrida typically focuses on language as the practice that reveals the most about how we are. Heidegger, instead starts with simple (usually rural) activity such as a craftsman working on something in his shop. But this difference ought not to come to much since Derrida says that the deep aspect of language - writing - structures any meaningful activity and Heidegger thinks of language as particularly revealing practice.[27]

Using Heidegger's terminology for the moment, if *language* is the condition of being, it must also be the condition of philosophy. It is the basis of philosophy as language that is the premise of Heidegger's ideas about the relation between art and philosophy. Not surprisingly, of all the arts, Heidegger is most interested in poetry. Since language is the condition of being, the differences between philosophy and poetry are potentially subsumed within this overarching unity. Indeed, from this perspective, the idea that it might be possible to distinguish between aesthetics and art in Heidegger is often to miss the point, both in terms of what Heidegger says, and the ways he says it. One of the central problems for Heidegger,

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[27] C. Spinosa, "Derrida and Heidegger: Iterability and *Ereignis*," in Dreyfus and Hall (eds.), *Heidegger: A Critical Reader*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992)

therefore, is how present his thoughts as both poetry and philosophy simultaneously. This is the most obvious place where the problem of form is raised in Heidegger's "philosophy." One of the biggest problems for the reader of Heidegger is how to deal with this necessary inseparability. The difficulty is to do so without either making an extraction which completely undermines Heidegger's most basic conviction, or replicating Heidegger's opacity.

The configuration of the inseparability of philosophy and poetry permeates Heidegger's ideas about art which, not surprisingly, concentrate on poetry. The sum of poetry and philosophy together is more than either in isolation. Thus, poetry/philosophy is potentially the most advanced means of representing the world. At the same time, because the world is language, as language poetry/philosophy cannot get out of itself to perform the act of revelation. Philosophy/poetry is always an act of concealment before it is a revelation. Timothy Clark explains this dynamic as follows:

> Language,...thus participates in a structure of *disclosure* or *appearing* that may never itself become an *object*. It is precisely in the disclosure of objectivity that the appearing is erased in what becomes apparent. As a mode of presencing, language can never be a simple *object* of representation. It is a transcendental horizon. Thus we remain, Heidegger writes in 'The Way of Language' 'committed to and within the being of language, and can never look at it from somewhere else.[28]

Two things need to be noted here. First, there is the transcendental status of "language". For, Heidegger (and Derrida), this makes the possibility of representation *of any kind* a potential impossibility. The second thing to note is how completely consistent Heidegger is being in arriving at this impasse. He starts with an ontology: to be is to be in language; philosophy and poetry are language; philosophical thought and poetic thought are, as language, the same. This is to say that, up to a point, Heidegger is an extremely rational thinker, and up to a point, he is thoroughly systematic. This obvious systematicity has

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[28] Timothy Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot: Sources of Derrida's notion and practice of literature*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 34.

generated an industry of systematic Heidegger exposition. This critical attitude considers that to understand Heidegger, he needs to be thought through. Thus, for example,

> Heidegger's philosophy is in all respects speculative in the grand manner and books purporting to unravel an aspect or aspects of this speculation have been and are being produced at a fairly continuous rate. As far as I know, however, there is no book length study of Heidegger's development of poetic language. The reason for this lack may be based on a view held by Joseph Kockelmans, editor of a recent volume entitled *Heidegger on Language*. Kockelmans is explaining the general purpose and scope of the book:
>
> > All of the papers combined do not give an adequate idea of Heidegger's conception of language, for it is not possible at this point in time to do so. Heidegger's view is still in the process of development, and many of his publications on the subject are not yet available. In view of this situation, it seems that this book points many basic problems for which Heidegger has tried to find acceptable solution.
>
> Now, if a systematic study of Heidegger and language was and is lacking because of incomplete experience with Heidegger's principles on that topic, then a work on Heidegger and poetic language could hardly be expected.[29]

The author of this passage is clearing the ground for his own systematic study on Heidegger's "development of poetic language" and having questioned Kockelman's hesitancy on grounds of incomplete assimilation of Heidegger, he goes on to say

> perhaps Kockelman's reservations compel silence on the part of prospective commentators, at least until one sufficiently gifted can shed light where all previous students, in mind if not in print, have discerned only shadows. But it does not seem to me that Heidegger's teaching on poetic language in particular is so oracular that it necessarily confounds all attempts at reconstruction and evaluation. And even if that teaching is generally impervious to more prosaic commentary, attempts at such commentary must be initiated at some time.[30]

To be facetious, the response to the last sentence is "why"? The complete systematic exposition of Heidegger's attitude to poetry is systematically demonstrated by Heidegger to be an impossibility. Heidegger develops an integrated speculative framework to demonstrate that language, poetry, and reason are definitively inseparable. This effectively prohibits the representation of one by the other. To re-present is to present again, and this is precisely

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[29] D. White, *Heidegger and the Language of Poetry*, (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 1978), p. x.
[30] D. White, *Heidegger and the Language of Poetry*, p. xi.

what the ubiquity of language prohibits; it can never step outside itself. The transcendent critique of Heidegger, based on the assumption of a significant difference between the language of the critic and Heidegger's language, is, as a critical disposition towards Heidegger, absolutely antithetical to *all* of Heidegger. As Steiner puts it: "To try to analyse Heideggerian "ontology," the study and theory of the nature of existence, is to speak, or to speak of, nonsense - non-sense in the most drastic connotations of the term."[31] In a trivial sense, what this implies is that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to do critical justice to Heidegger. It raises all the familiar questions about the relation between critic and text that have been raised by deconstruction. More important, the belief in the possibility of a complete speculative unpacking of Heidegger, expressed by statements like "commentary must begin sometime", or that what prohibits understanding is the as yet "incomplete assimilation of Heidegger", is oddly complicit with Heidegger's own way of thinking. As Adorno says of Heidegger, "One of the invarients of his philosophy (though never called invarients, of course) is that each substantive deficiency, each absence of cognition, will be revalued into a sign of profundity."[32] Thus, to think it is possible to write about Heidegger, to re-present his theories, implicitly rejects Heidegger's ontology. At the same time, the attempt to do so remains absolutely complicit with the urge in Heidegger's thought, which is always promising that the next thought will reveal "Being".

This is not to say that the speculative unpacking of Heidegger is itself worthless, far from it. The process is important and revealing. Where it becomes spurious is where the aspiration for critical insight looses sight of itself as the temporary deferral of infinite deferral. One cannot be completely clear about Heidegger because he himself could not be clear. This is not because the true Heidegger has not yet been properly expounded, or that Heidegger is

[31] Georg Steiner, *Heidegger*, p. 4.
[32] *Negative Dialectics*, p.76.

so profound that he cannot be paraphrased. Rather, Heidegger himself could not say what he thought he wanted to say.

If the speculative "reconstruction" of Heidegger represents a distinctive approach to reading him, another approach concentrates on affirming the impasse his speculative thought generates. This reading of Heidegger is more interested in his extremely suggestive attempts to configure the possibility that language might become more than language. It is here that Heidegger's relevance for Derrida becomes clearer. Indeed, it tends to be the literary critical tendencies of deconstruction which is most attuned to this aspect of Heidegger's work. Timothy Clark's book *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot* exemplifies and explains this relationship. The first chapter discusses Heidegger's extremely ambiguous term *Dichtung* as the context through which to consider Heidegger's attempts to get beyond language. A function of the ambiguity of *Dichtung* is that Clark's discussion returns to it again and again, accumulating different moments of its definition, while never being definitive. In the most general sense *Dichtung* appears as, " a mode in which 'truth' happens".[33] Much later he suggests *Dichtung* is "*mimesis* as the appearance of being...though it is not explicitly named as such."[34] Along with these suggestions of what *Dichtung* might achieve, Clark gives a definition of what it *cannot* be:

> (1) it would have to be something other than an object in the sense of an object of consciousness and hence (2) neither addresses itself *to* a subject in the Post-Cartesian sense nor (3) rise from the action of any subject. Needless to say, these are heavy demands.[35]

Clark later introduces Derrida's neologism *littérature* which, like *Dichtung*, seems to imply some form of radical language in language, but is equally undefinable. The paradox of simultaneous appearance and withdrawal of meaning in language is central to Heidegger's

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[33] Timothy Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot*, p. 24.
[34] Timothy Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot*, p. 112.
[35] Timothy Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot*, p. 24.

and Derrida's ideas of the possibility of meaning. Attempts to write what this means generate repeating motifs in Heidegger's, Derrida's and Clark's language, which variously represent the simultaneous opening and closing of meaning as *doubling*, a *fold* in language,[36] the difference between the "B" of "Being" and the "b" of "being", and Heidegger's famous assertion that language is the "House of Being".[37] All these attempts to explain the simultaneous appearance and disappearance of meaning contain the implication that somehow language has to become something almost materially different from itself. This is not meant to diagnose some blanket rhetorical tendency in Heidegger and Derrida. Rather, it is to signal that in all their considerations of representation, they arrive at the issue from the presupposition that it is an impossibility. This impossibility derives from the fact that for them, there is only one medium of representation: language. How can language represent itself? This straining towards the physicality of language can be construed as the real physical sense of the difference between "B" and "b", but it can also be construed as applying to the form of language.

To give some indication of where this claim is going to lead, we need to recall the discussion of the mutually dependent relation between Hegel's premises, and their explicit articulation in the from of his philosophy. For Hegel, there was an absolutely adequate correspondence between reason *qua* reflection, and the speculative unity of his philosophy and the rational world. For Heidegger, the form of reflection as "a method of thought which has to do with something given" is explicitly rejected. Indeed, it is precisely our preoccupation with particular disclosures of truth which obscures us from a deeper relatedness to the world. From a Hegelian perspective this pre-empts philosophy from taking on its distinctive form. Heidegger's brief conclusion to his reading of Hegel's

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[36] Derrida quoted in Timothy Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot*, p. 33.
[37] Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism" in trans. and (ed.) Krell, *Heidegger: Basic Writings*, (London: Routledge & Keegan and Paul, 1978), p.239.

Phenomenology of Spirit is most revealing in his rejection of this aspect of Hegel. Heidegger only deals with only the first two sections of Hegel's work, reading it so closely as to be virtually reading out the original. As the translators of Heidegger's commentary say, "This reading reveals the phenomenology of spirit as a thinking which gathers itself up in a gradual, always self-assured manner. The emergent unfolding of this gathering of "the phenomenology of spirit" marks the simplicity of Heidegger's reading."[38] Despite Heidegger's apparent neutrality, or rather, complete submission to the terms and language of Hegel's argument, his brief conclusion reveals specific, and anti-Hegelian intentions:

> I close by breaking off and foregoing artificial summary. Everything should remain open. You are not supposed to snatch up a fixed opinion about this work, or even a point of view for judging it. On the contrary, you are supposed to learn to understand the task of the confrontation that becomes necessary here - what it is and what it requires.[39]

That Heidegger stops where he does, and states that "Everything should remain open" gives away his attitude towards Hegel. For Heidegger, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is a work of *thinking*. He breaks off his reading before the work of thinking is demonstrated to be thoroughly mediated by the conditions of its being thought. That is to say, Heidegger is not interested in the relation between the particular judgements Hegel makes and the systematic unity of his thought. Like Lukács, Heidegger concentrates on Hegel's failure, asking, "...*is* the absolute really actual in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*?"[40] It is because it is not that Heidegger questions the necessity for Hegel's elaborate attempt to demonstrate the absolute in the particular. Heidegger asks, is the absolute not always already the case? Heidegger concludes that

> the absolute must *be* actual *before* the beginning of the work. The legitimacy of the beginning cannot be established by the end, because the end is itself only the beginning. Thus the leap into the whole of the absolute is all that is

[38] Martin Heidegger, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. P. Emad and K. Maly, (Bloomington: Indiana, 1988), p. viii.
[39] Martin Heidegger, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 149.
[40] Martin Heidegger, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, p.149.

> left? In that case, does the problem not become simply the factual issue of executing or re-executing the leap?
>
> Certainly. But rightly understood, this issue is itself the question: what should man do as an existing being? *Where* does he stand, that he should or should not make the leap and so become something other than man.[41]

Hegel's attempt to think himself out of thought is, for Heidegger, an impossibility. There is no before and after to thinking. What must be reflected on in this scenario is what it might mean to consider the possibility of doing what Hegel tried to do. The answer might be simply to "re-execute" Hegel's leap in conceiving of the possibility of what *Phenomenology of Spirit* set out to do. This might be a matter of replicating Hegel's work of thinking through a close re-reading of his work. This, for Heidegger, is the significance of the *Phenomenology of Spirit qua* a demonstration of thought trying to think against itself.

From the Hegelian perspective, making judgements about what is given to consciousness is the necessary definition of philosophy. It is by making such judgements about its adequacy in representing the given that philosophy develops a form as the tension between its premises and its particular judgements about the world. Philosophy can only think against itself in so far as it experiences contradiction between its particular reflective judgement about a phenomenon, and discovering that this is not a sufficient representation of it. Having rejected the reflective judgement about the "given", on grounds that it only ever judges appearances, what is left for Heidegger is "abstract speculation" that is, speculation which constructs its "form" completely on its own terms. Adorno puts Heidegger's problem as follows:

> Intentionally or not, every judgement - even an analytical one, as shown by Hegel - carries with it the claim to predicate something that is not simply identical with the mere concept of the subject. If it ignores this requirement, the judgement breaks the contract it has previously signed by its form. But the concept of Being as handled by the new ontology cannot help breaking that contract. In this ontology, Being must be defined by itself alone because it is held to be neither comprehensible in concepts - in other words, neither

[41] Martin Heidegger, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 149.

> "transmitted" - nor immediately demonstrable after the model of sensory ascertainment. In lieu of any critical authority of Being we get a reiteration of the mere name.[42]

Heidegger's Being is so abstract that Heidegger is effectively thinking about nothing. It is not just Heidegger's ontology which produces the radical indeterminacy of his thought, but Heidegger's abstract speculation which develops from not thinking about something. From a Hegelian perspective, Heidegger's formless philosophising is thus indeed, first and foremost, language, not philosophy. This is the paradox created by framing the abstract problem of trying to think out of "being" into "Being". It is also the paradox that Heidegger cannot resolve, not because "Being" is some mysterious condition which we simply do not have the power to imagine; but because the way "Being" is framed as a philosophical problem prohibits its philosophical resolution. From a different perspective, to think "Being," poetry and philosophy have to be thought together, and therefore remain in a formless unity. Philosophy, absolved from its responsibility of trying to make reflective judgements, becomes indistinguishable from poetry. The elision of philosophical and poetic form results is the absence of form, both in the sense that they become the same, and because that sameness is necessarily detached from the capacity to represent the "given". A formless poetry/philosophy replicates the formless world of the abstract concept of "Being".

At the beginning of this chapter, the way Kant's and Hegel's philosophical premises framed their attitude to art was discussed. The same mode of critique, applied to Heidegger, has revealed the following. First, that the impossibility of language representing itself is not an absolute problem. Second, that Heidegger's prognosis for the inseparability of philosophy and art is a function of this premise. Moreover, like Hegel, Heidegger is being completely consistent in arriving at the various impasses he generates for himself. This is not to say that

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[42] *Negative Dialectics*. p. 71.

Heidegger does not generate interesting and suggestive insights into philosophy, language, and art. Rather, the ambience created by his systematic development of the problem of "meaning" as a universal problem develops a situation where representation is always framed by its inseparability from language, and thereby always predicates its own impossibility. Art and philosophy are the same, before they can be different.

The suggestion that all aspects of Heidegger's argument logically generate indeterminacy, and that this derives from the claim that language is the condition of being, needs to be further developed. This can be done with reference to Derrida's critique of Hegel.[43] Derrida's metacriticism of Hegel starts from a different perspective than Heidegger's. Its broad trajectory and implications, however, are extremely similar to Heidegger's as described above. Again, the aspect of Hegel which Derrida most clearly seeks to distinguish himself from is what he sees as the *production* of philosophical meaning in Hegel. For both Heidegger and Derrida, this aspect of Hegel's understanding of his philosophy is simply the idling of thought. By invoking Derrida here I am not claiming that he and Heidegger are the same. Rather, that their common distinctness from Adorno, especially in their attitude to Hegel, resides in their common distance from the possibility of a distinctly philosophical "form" of language.

Derrida on Hegel

Even the title Derrida uses, "From Restricted to General Economy A Hegelianism Without Reserve", predicts the explosion of the restricted economy of Hegel's reason into the general economy of language. Using Bataille, Derrida begins by emphasising the

[43] Jaques Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy A Hegelianism Without Reserve" in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Blass, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 250-277.

inadequacy of critiques of Hegel which do not understand the unity of his system. He quotes Bataille, for example, saying of Nietzsche, that he "knew of Hegel only the usual vulgarisation."[44] Derrida's critique, which is a reading of Bataille's reading of Hegel, can be described as identifying moments in Hegel's argument which are seen to dramatised by his use of metaphorical language. For Derrida, this gives Hegel's, wholly rational argument, a claim to connect with the world. Thus, for example, in the Master/Slave dialectic in the *Phenomenology*, Derrida can be read as arguing that the words "life" and "death", and what they signify in biological terms, are usurped by Hegel's reason to become integrated into the rational economy of his system:

> Hegel had clearly proclaimed the necessity of the master's retaining the life that he exposes to risk. Without this economy of life, the "trial by death, however, cancels both the truth which was to result from it, and therefore the certainty of self altogether" (Hegel, p.233). To rush headlong into death pure and simple is thus to risk the absolute loss of meaning, in the extent to which meaning necessarily traverses the truth of the master and of self consciousness.[45]

Derrida is saying that although Hegel says the "master" must "rush headlong into death", he is actually allowing no such thing. Within the rational structure of Hegel's system, this death cannot take place: "Through ruse of life, that is, of reason, life has thus stayed alive. Another concept of life has been surreptitiously put in its place, to remain there, never to be exceeded, any more than reason is ever exceeded."[46] For consciousness to die would be to loose the recognition it aspired to in risking death. Now, this criticism is immediately preceded by Derrida writing: "Burst of laughter from Bataille. Through ruse of life,...etc." In other words, Derrida is asking us to imagine Bataille laughing at Hegel. In this sense, it is not always clear whether Derrida is responding to Hegel or to Bataille. Given the ideas discussed earlier, those of "doubling" or the "fold in language" and the idea of representation as re-

[44] Jaques Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy" p. 252.
[45] Jaques Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy" p. 255.
[46] Jaques Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy" p. 255.

representation, this should not be a surprise. The way Derrida presents his argument is constantly to emphasise the seamless folding of his, Bataille's, and Hegel's writing.

So, against the rational containment of Hegel's argument, Derrida juxtaposes Bataille's "laughter". Bataille is laughing at Hegel's incapacity to allow the master to die, to embrace absolute negativity. Thus,

> What is laughable is the *submission* to the self-evidence of meaning, to the force of this imperative: that there must be meaning, that nothing must be definitely lost in death, or further, that death should receive the signification of "abstract negativity," that a work must always be possible which, because it defers enjoyment, confers meaning, seriousness, and truth on the "putting at stake."[47]

Moreover, Derrida makes a crucial admission - and this laughter is the *only* response to the unity of Hegel's system because "Laughter alone exceeds dialectics and dialectician: it bursts out only on the basis of an absolute renunciation of meaning, an absolute risking of death, what Hegel calls abstract negativity."[48]

So, what Derrida has done is to acknowledge the absolute consistency of Hegel's system. He has looked at a section of Hegel's argument, and being critical, refuses to read the master/slave dialectic on Hegel's terms. Derrida argues that although explicitly engaged by Hegel, "life" and more specifically, "death", are assimilated and contained within the progress of reason. Hegel's system simply cannot assimilate what is meant by "death", and only names it as "abstract negativity". "Death" can only appear outside the system and emerges as Bataille's laughter at Hegel's total "*submission* to the self-evidence of meaning."

Consider what Derrida says about Hegel in the light of Rodolphe Gasché's definition of deconstruction:

> Deconstruction must be understood, we contend, as the attempt to "account," in a certain manner, for a heterogeneous variety or manifold of nonlogical contradictions and discursive inequalities of all sorts that continues to haunt and fissure even the *successful* development of philosophical arguments and

[47] Jaques Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy" p. 256-57.
[48] Jaques Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy" p. 256.

> their systematic exposition. What is this nonhomogeneous manifold for which we claim that deconstruction provides, in a certain manner, a unifying principle, origin, or ground? These dissimilarities are to be located, first, in concept-formation; second, on the level of strategies of philosophical argumentation; and third, on the level of textual arrangement and disposition of the different parts of a philosophical work.
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> ...inconsistencies...which, once again, do not in the philosopher's eye, put the unity, coherence, wholeness of the philosophical discourse into question. Yet these discrepancies are there. In complicated active and passive manner they contribute to what is perceived as the philosophical discourse's accomplished sense unity. Hence, these discrepancies, as well as all the others mentioned, need to be accounted for.[49]

On the basis of this definition, Derrida is not deconstructing Hegel. Indeed, he is admitting that because Hegel is so completely consistent with himself at *every* level, he prohibits the normal procedures of deconstruction. The *sine qua non* of deconstruction is that in any philosophical argument "dissimilarities are to be located, first, in concept-formation; second, on the level of strategies of philosophical argumentation; and third, on the level of textual arrangement and disposition of the different parts of a philosophical work." In Hegel, and especially in the way Derrida represents Hegel, this is just not the case. To laugh at the master/slave dialectic is to laugh at the whole of Hegel. This is why Bataille's laughter is the only possible criticism of Hegel, and, to reiterate, this is not deconstructing Hegel. The device of deconstruction is to demonstrate that a philosopher cannot achieve what he/she claims to be doing because of internal discrepancies and inconsistencies. In Hegel, there are none.

From being unable to undermine Hegel from within, Derrida develops a crucial series of claims about the incapacity of philosophy as a *whole*. These need to be broken down and considered in turn. The point from which I will start is Derrida writing, "The blind spot of Hegelianism, *around* which can be organised the representation of meaning..."[50] This is

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[49] Rodolphe Gasché, "Infrastructures and Systematicity" in John Sallis, (ed.), *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jaques Derrida*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 4-5.
[50] Jaques Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy", p. 259.

saying that the only way the "representation of meaning" can take place in Hegel is because of his "blind spot." The blind spot, on whose condition the representation of meaning in Hegel can take place, "is the *point* at which destruction, suppression, death and sacrifice constitute so irreversible expenditure, so radical a negativity - here we would have to say an expenditure and negativity *without reserve* - that they can no longer be contained as negativity in a process or a system." In other words, the moment of meaning of Hegel is the moment of his failure to allow that negativity which would bring down his system.

Derrida then makes a more general claim: "In discourse (the unity of process and system), negativity is always the underside and accomplice of positivity. Negativity cannot be spoken of, nor has it ever been except in this fabric of meaning." In other words, the negativity to which philosophy can give expression is never said directly, but is in "discourse" as "the unity of process and system". Derrida continues: "Now the sovereign operation, the *point of nonreserve*, is neither positive nor negative. It cannot be inscribed in discourse, except by crossing out predicates or by practising a contradictory superimposition that then exceeds the logic of philosophy", i.e. Bataille's laughter.

Now, if we remember Derrida's critique of Saussure, we will recall that the basis for the distinction of "speech" and "writing" was that, for example,

> Writing is '*inaugural*' in so far as it emancipates meaning from the contingencies of the immediate context and directs it towards a horizon of unforeseen possibilities... Writing, since it is constituted by the suspension of immediate reference, is freed from instrumental notions of language...Literary thought is the thought that is oddly constitutive of *nothing*.[51]

In Hegel, none of these claims for writing hold. Bataille and Derrida can point out that "death" does not mean "death" in Hegel, but while this aspect of Hegel's language may point to "unforeseen possibilities", it is otherwise so completely integrated into his system by

[51] Timothy Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot*", p.110.

other "arch-syntheses and infrastructures" (to use Gasché's terminology), that Hegel remains thoroughly intact and untroubled by this fragmentary deconstruction.

What Derrida appears to have found in Hegel, then, is writing which contradicts Derrida's own definition of its instability, and therefore its meaning. "For meaning, when lost to discourse, is absolutely destroyed and consumed."[52] In other words, it is precisely because Hegel's discourse (the unity of process and system) is so perfect, that it becomes "neutral". Now, this is where we start laughing at Derrida, because what prevents him from allowing Hegel's discourse to be thus "neutral" is the ubiquity of language. If as "discourse" Hegel is "neutral", then, as always already writing, it cannot be. Here Derrida makes an explicit and foundational claim: "There is only one discourse, it is significative, and here one cannot get around Hegel. The poetic or the ecstatic is that *in every discourse* which can open itself up to the absolute loss of its sense, to the (non)base of the sacred, of nonmeaning, of un-knowledge or of play, to the swoon from which it is reawakened by the throw of the dice." So, given that the *logic* of his position prohibits him from allowing the neutrality of Hegel's argument, Derrida must find "the poetic" in Hegel. He takes a definition of poetry from Bataille who says of poetry that "'It is unfortunate to possess no more than ruins, but this is not any longer to posses nothing; it is to keep in one hand what the other gives.' An operation that is still Hegelian."[53] What makes Hegel poetic for Derrida is that his philosophy consists in "still attributing a meaning, within discourse, to the absence of meaning."[54]

Now, the problem with this argument is that it does not definitively remove Hegel's argument from the above definition of its "neutrality". The reason why this is so is because to distinguish the "poetic" from "discourse" is, for Derrida, a matter of *reading*. First, Derrida reads Hegel as discourse, generating that discourse as "neutral", the freezing out of meaning.

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[52] Jaques Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy", p. 261.
[53] Jaques Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy", p. 262.
[54] Jaques Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy", p. 262.

Then he re-reads his own argument and says that discourse is "poetic" because, like poetry, "discourse" "attributes meaning to the absence of meaning".

Consider that one of the great criticisms of Hegel's *Aesthetics* is that it assimilated art to philosophy: art is spirit's knowledge of itself in sensuous form. Thus, the "imagination" which, for Hegel, is the medium of poetry, is dialectical and so ultimately "translatable" into reason. In the Introduction to *Aesthetics* Hegel acknowledges that this order of claim appears unacceptable, if not impossible: "In the face of [art's] immeasurable fullness of fancy and its free products, it looks as if thought must loose courage to bring them *completely* before itself, to criticise them, and arrange them under its universal formulae."[55] But this is what Hegel sets out to do, and within the terms of his system, does do. As Shapiro puts it,

> By insisting on the dialectical nature of poetic meaning Hegel makes a cognitive defence of poetry which allies it with philosophy. The analogy between the two is not in their shared deviation from tautology or empirical verifiability, as the positivists suggested, but their possession of a common object and mode of thought, each of which is highly articulated.[56]

Equally important to remember, poetry (and art in general) fails, on Hegel's terms, not because of some esoteric content, but because of the undialectical representation of spirit undialectically experienced. Poetry thus has to be read dialectically to reveal its truth. This means reading poetry against its explicit meaning, and reading it in the light of the principle of sufficient reason.

Now, it seems to me that Derrida is performing on Hegel something like the reverse of what Hegel is accused of doing to poetry. Derrida brings to his reading of Hegel the presupposition that Hegel's argument is "writing". Using "Bataille's laughter", Derrida appears to claim that Hegel can only be criticised from without, by laughing at the integrity of

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[55] G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, p. 5.

[56] Gary Shapiro, "Hegel on Implicit and Dialectical Meanings of Poetry", in Steinkraus and Schmitz, (eds) *Art and Philosophy in Hegel's Philosophy*, (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1980), p.47.

the system. Now thus far, what Derrida argues is convincing, but to invert what Shapiro said about Hegel

> By insisting on the "written" nature of philosophical meaning Derrida makes a defence of the indeterminacy of philosophy, which allies it to poetry. The analogy between the two is not in their shared deviation from tautology or empirical verifiability, as the positivists suggested, but their disposession of a common object and mode of thought, each of which is unarticulated.

The point is that just as there is a logic of determinacy to Hegel's thought, there is a logic of indeterminacy to Derrida's. Just as Hegel will always diagnose determinate meaning from poetry, because it is always made accountable to reason, so Derrida will always diagnose indeterminate meaning from philosophy because it is always made accountable to "writing". As Shapiro remarks, "To the extent that Hegel is committed to the logic of determinateness, he sees the metaphorical character of poetry as a necessary defect and the philosophical appeal to possibility as a failure to achieve wisdom which shrouds itself in mystery."[57] Again, this can be exactly "inverted" to produce Derrida's favouring of indeterminateness, the metaphorical character of poetry against the reflective judgement of philosophy, and the literary appeal to impossibility which shrouds itself in mystery as the antidote to philosophical claims to truth.

To return the earlier preliminary discussion of Adorno's critique of Heidegger, Derrida's argument does not attack the speculative (or what he calls discursive) unity of Hegel's system; this remains intact in Derrida's critique. What Derrida does is to sever that speculative unity from its claim to represent the world. For Derrida, meaning is a function of the relation between "writing" and the infinite possible readings, so he does not consider the necessary unity of reflection and speculation in the production of Hegel's thought. In Derrida, "speech" claims immediate truth because of the inextricability of production and

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[57] Gary Shapiro, "Hegel on Implicit and Dialectical Meanings of Poetry", pp. 52-53.

reception guarantees immediate reference. In writing, that unity is severed. Reception determines reference, and any sense in which production might impinge on meaning becomes irrelevant. Indeed, "writing" is that severance of meaning from production.

The implications of this fundamental difference between Hegel and Derrida become clearer when the latter tries to formulate what is to be done after the critique of Hegel. We will recall that Derrida had characterised the poetic in Hegel as "still attributing a meaning, within discourse, to the absence of meaning."[58]. Derrida now calls this "minor play"[59]. Hegel is "playing" in the sense that he is "attributing meaning to the absence of meaning", but this is only "minor play" because, in order to be seen as such, we need "Bataille's Laughter". The problem, as Derrida frames it, is to achieve "major play", which is to hold Bataille's laughter and Hegel's discourse together, without subsuming one within the other. On what terms then, might "major play" be achieved? Here Derrida makes the claim that the philosophical side of "minor play" is a function of the philosophical "desire for meaning" expressing itself as the production, i.e. work, of philosophical argument:

> a proposition with which the history of philosophy is confused; a proposition that determines work as the meaning of meaning, and *techne* as the unfolding of truth; a proposition powerfully reassembled in the Hegelian moment, and a proposition that Bataille, in the wake of Nietzsche, wanted to bring to the point of enunciation, and whose denunciation he wished to wrest from the non-basis of inconceivable nonsense, finally placing it within major play."[60]

Here we come to a crucial point in Derrida's argument, where he characterises philosophical discourse as labour, which is the opposite of play. The only way philosophy can get beyond its limitations is to become play, which is the opposite of philosophical discourse.

> The necessity of *logical* continuity is the decision or interpretative melieu of all Hegelian interpretations. In interpreting negativity as labour, in betting for discourse, meaning, history, etc., Hegel has bet against play, against chance. He has blinded himself to the possibility of his own bet, on the fact that the conscious suspension of play (for example, the passage through the certitude

[58] Jaques Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy", p. 262.
[59] Jaques Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy", p. 262.
[60] Jaques Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy", p. 262.

> of oneself and through lordship as the independence of self-consciousness) was itself a phase of play; and the fact of that play *includes* the work of meaning or the meaning of work, and includes them not in terms of *knowledge*, but in terms of *inscription*: meaning is a *function* of play, is inscribed in a certain place in the configuration of a meaning less play.[61]

What is beginning to emerge out of Derrida's confrontation with Hegel are a series of oppositions which, if he is to engage "major play," come to configure Derrida's position around some intractable problems. Derrida has to become involved in the *production* of that "something" which is already predetermined as "writing", whose meanings are not, on Derrida's terms *produced,* but generated out of the fluidity of its *reception.* Shapiro notes that this is not a new criticism of Hegel. "Much of Kierkegaard's attack on Hegel, repeated with variations by Sartre and Heidegger, is based on the claim that Hegel supposes an impossibly determinate relationship, amounting to identity, between himself and his readers."[62] Derrida repeats this criticism within the paradigmatic opposition between "speech" and "writing," and can only criticise Hegel's "neutral" discourse from the play going on outside. There is no play *in* Hegel's system, but for the "still attributing a meaning, within discourse, to the absence of meaning",[63] which is only revealed, as such, by Bataille's laughter. Philosophical discourse is the opposite of play, which is the opposite of labour. Again, we need to emphasise how logical all this is, and the logic is always pointing towards indeterminacy - even the original distinction between Bataille's Laughter and Hegel's system only takes place as written - but this just serves to emphasise Derrida's point.

Derrida is practising a mode of argument which, like Hegel's is very difficult to criticise on its own terms. The logic, of Derrida's own argument moves him inexorably towards silence or play. The fluidity on which the possibility of meaning depends is not in the power of the producer of the text to generate; it is a function of its various receptions. Thus,

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[61] Jaques Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy", p. 260.
[62] Gary Shapiro, "Hegel on Implicit and Dialectical Meanings of Poetry", p. 52.
[63] Jaques Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy", p. 262.

the next section of his argument begins with a discussion of the word. "silence". Derrida's playfulness is an attempt to get to "major play", but it is also because there is nothing to do for the writer, who produces, what is to be done is to be done only by the reader. Derrida's writing, like the systematic readers of Heidegger is a deferral of deferral. The systematic readers of Heidegger believe that if they carry on long and hard enough they will explain him. Derrida, on his own terms, should stop writing, but he continues, and in the extremely suggestive arguments he produces, probably approaches "major play". As Clark indicates, however, the questions Derrida is perpetually raising, without answering, give his position a degree of impending collapse:

> *how can one practice heteronomy*? If to welcome *the other* is to experience the non familiar, unforeseen, the incalculable, or that in relation to which any concept is inadequate, how can thought or language affirm it except in negatives? It is not the *concept* of the other, or the notion of a language that correlates with the other, a contradiction in terms? It is because the *heteronomy* at issue is so completely illusive that the misreadings of Derrida's work as a form of extreme scepticism or even nihilism are so difficult to avoid. Yet it is not a question of rejection of the logico-systematic forms of reasoning *per se*, whether in favour of a supposed relativism or paralysing epistemological *aporias*. It is rather a matter of reading writing according to a new elusive, *heteronomic* forms of 'coherence', as binding in their way as the more familiar constraints of logic.[64]

As Clark suggests here, and as Gasché has argued elsewhere, the problem for Derrida the writer of "major play," is about "*heteronomic* forms of 'coherence'", that is, forms of coherence which hold language together in a way that is not completely philosophical. As has already been indicated, this is very close to Adorno's attitude to the significance of philosophical form. What should also be clear, however, is that the way Adorno arrives at the significance of an anti-systematic philosophical form is from a wholly different perspective. Put simply, Adorno has a far more developed idea of the playful moment *in* philosophy than Derrida allows in his rejection of philosophy. This in turn is inseparable from Adorno's

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[64] Timothy Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot*, p. 17.

emphasis on the necessity of the philosophical judgement of the "given." With this in mind we can begin to construct Adorno's attitude to philosophical form, through his critique of Heidegger.

Adorno on Heidegger

Adorno's critique of Heidegger, which forms the first part of *Negative Dialectics*, deals with the question of the relation of language and philosophy. Adorno sometimes refers to Heidegger by name, sometimes referring to his school of thought as the "new ontology". Importantly, Adorno describes *Negative Dialectics* as "retrospective,"[65] which is to say it is a summary of his difference from Heidegger, rather than a working out of his own position.

The terms Adorno describes as orientating his critique of Heidegger are that "rather than judged from above, this ontology is understood and immanently criticised out of the need for it..."[66] Adorno shares Heidegger's conviction that the way we normally experience the world is governed by interests and desires which actually obscure it from us. What Adorno is so critical of, however, is the way Heidegger sets about countering this false consciousness. By saying that he will use "immanent criticism" Adorno asserts that he will look at Heidegger's thought on its own terms. He will explain what it is about Heidegger's thought which prohibits itself from doing what it sets out to do, which is to understand what it might mean to get beyond the appearance of things. Throughout, Adorno frames Heidegger's position in relation to Hegel, and what emerges is that Adorno represents

[65] *Negative Dialectics*, p. xix.
[66] *Negative Dialectics*, p. xx.

himself as virtually identical to Heidegger in some of their responses to Hegel, and completely different from others.

Expressing sentiments which almost exactly parallel Derrida's criticisms of Hegel, Adorno emphasises his interest in those aspects of experience which Hegel neglected.

> The matters of true philosophical interest at this point in history are those which Hegel, agreeing with tradition, expressed his disinterest. They are nonconceptuality, individuality, and particularity - things which ever since Plato used to be dismissed as transitory and insignificant, which Hegel labelled "lazy Existenz." Philosophy's theme would consist of qualities it down grades as contingent, as *quantité négligeable*. A matter of urgency to the concept would be what it fails to cover, what its abstract mechanism eliminates, what is not already a case of the concept.[67]

The question is, how is this tendency countered? Adorno's charge against Heidegger, as has already been suggested, is that what he attempts has a purely methodological basis. What does this mean? Heidegger starts with an ontology and extrapolates logical implications of his definition of being for every scenario he touches, including the problem of representation. This process diagnoses deficiencies in our mode of experience at every turn, but, at the same time, each "cognitive deficiency" is a simple echo of "something missing which is not to be produced" and so "they are its complimentary ideology."[65] In other words, Heidegger excludes something from his programme which not only prohibits success, but generates indeterminacy: "The true philosophical task, according to Heidegger, would be to conceive Being. yet Being resists any cognitive definition. This makes the appeal to conceive it a hollow one."[68] What then, does Heidegger do wrong, or miss out?

Agreeing with Heidegger, Adorno admits that philosophy has no direct access to what Hegel calls "lazy Existenz". Indeed, this is not just an admission on Adorno's part, it is constantly being hammered away through the principle of nonidentity. At the same time, Adorno remarks,

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[67] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 8.
[68] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 98.

> Yet the appearance of identity is inherent in thought itself, in its pure form. To think is to identify. Conceptual order is content to screen what thinking seeks to comprehend. The semblance and truth of thought entwine. The semblance cannot be decreed away, as by avowal of a being-in-itself outside the totality of concrete definitions. It is a thesis secretly implied by Kant - and mobilised against him by Hegel - that the transconceptual "in itself" is void, being wholly indefinite. 5

Here we have the first and most basic difference between Adorno, on the one hand, and Heidegger and Derrida on the other. Both the latter, as did Kant, identify the "transconceptual" as a "void" that, as such, is conceived as some "realm" of "Being" or "létterature", which might be grasped in its negative totality. With such a conception of the task of philosophy, writes Adorno "The suspended character of thought is thus raised to the very inexpressibility which the thought seeks express. The non-objective is enhanced into an outlined object of its own essence and thereby violated."[69] and "the inexpressible becomes explicit and compact with the word "Being"...".[70] Of Heidegger, he writes "he talks as if the contents we wanted to rescue were thus directly in our minds."[71] Although the target here is Heidegger, precisely the same criticism can be made of Derrida who seems to locate the possibility of meaning in a mode of meaning that is first and foremost different from Hegel's "discourse". That is to say, Derrida configures the possibility of "major play" purely in terms of doing the opposite of what Hegel *wrote* at every turn. Against this mystification of the transconceptual, Adorno contends, "in philosophy we literally seek to immerse ourselves in things that are heterogeneous to it, without placing those things in prefabricated categories...our aim is total self relinquishment."[72] Furthermore,

> if it were delicately understood, the changed philosophy would be infinite in the sense of scorning solidification in a body of innumerable theorems. Its substance would lie in the diversity of objects that impinge on it and of the

[69] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 110.
[70] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 110.
[71] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 98.
[72] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 13.

> object it seeks, a diversity not wrought by any schema; to those objects, philosophy would truly give itself.[73]

Now, notwithstanding the difference with Derrida just emphasised, we can construe what Adorno is asking of philosophy as remaining close to Derrida's demands. Adorno speaks of "total self-relinquishment", of philosophy "giving itself", and that "philosophy is more than bustle only where it runs the risk of total failure..."[74] Derrida quotes Bataille, who himself may be quoting Nietzsche, as saying, "A fundamental principle is expressed as follows: 'communication' cannot take place from one full intact being to another: it requires beings who have put the being within themselves *at stake*, have placed at the limit of death, of nothingness."[75] The difference comes when we begin to work out what this *putting at stake* of philosophy implies for Adorno. As a point of departure we can take Adorno's assertion that "Necessity compels philosophy to operate with concepts, but this necessity must not be turned into a virtue of their priority..."[76] For the moment, the "necessity" for concepts in philosophy needs to be taken as a simple assertion whose implications will develop. It is worth keeping in mind that the assertion is immediately followed up by a moment of equivocation. Adorno distinguishes between two types of substance in concepts that pertain to them when considered from different perspectives:

> The substance of concepts is to them both immanent, as far as mind is concerned, and transcendent as far as being is concerned.[77]

To make sense of this we need Heidegger. Heidegger, we will recall, makes a distinction between different levels of comprehension of our being in the world. One level comprehension is governed by a mode of untruth wherein we represent the world to ourselves on the basis of what is readily available and accessible. The other level is the

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[73] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 13.
[74] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 19.
[75] Jaques Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy", p. 263.
[76] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 11.
[77] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 12.

potentially impenetrable, or at least very difficult to think, idea that things have a "Being" beyond the comprehension we can have of them in the other mode. What Adorno says is that from the perspective of what is immediately available and accessible to us, the substance of concepts is immanent, which is to say that substance can be measured in terms of the adequacy of the correspondence between a judgement and its object. From the latter perspective, by contrast, the substance of the concept is "transcendent". Because the concept does not fully add up to its object, it leaves a remainder. Now, for Heidegger, these different modes of consciousness are hierarchically arranged: "being" and "Being". For Adorno they are both necessary and integrated components of doing philosophy. Now, Adorno levels against Heidegger, a criticism which virtually replicates an aspect of Hegel's critique of Kant. We will recall that one of the accusations Hegel levels at Kant is taking the logical analysis of experience for the empirical truth of *experience*. Adorno accuses Heidegger of doing the same thing to rational reflection. We will recall that Heidegger's problem with rational reflection on the world is that it breaks apart that unity of experience which it is the task of rational thinking to demonstrate. Adorno says this is a rationally overdetermined representation of rational thought. Heidegger's rejection of rational reflection is, itself, irrational.

> To think means to think something. By itself, the logically abstract form of "something," something that is meant or judged, does not claim to posit a being; and yet, surviving in it - indelible from thinking that would delete it - is that which is not identical with thinking, which is not thinking at all. The ratio becomes irrational when it forgets this, where it runs counter to the meaning of thought by hypostatyzing its products, the abstractions.[78]

To "hypostatize" means to construe a conceptual entity as a real existent. This is what Heidegger does to the rational judgement. Now Adorno says, once we have acknowledged

[78] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 34.

that reason is itself never fully rational, we can get away from the preoccupation with the philosophical concept as necessitating the demise of philosophy *qua* reason, pure and simple,

> To be aware of this is to be able to get rid of concept fetishism. Philosophical reflection makes sure of the nonconceptual in the concept.[79]

Concept fetishism is any attitude to philosophy, positive or negative, which understands the concept from the perspective of either "mind" or "being", as the be-all and end-all of philosophy. The second sentence, although suggestive, is more opaque. We can provisionally identify "philosophical reflection" as that mode of *dialectical* thinking which holds to both ideas of the substance of the concept described above. What does this imply for the practice of philosophy?

Here we come to an absolutely fundamental distinction between Adorno and Derrida and it centres on the question of philosophical form, and where they locate "play". Adorno writes:

> The un-naïve thinker knows how far he remains from the object of his thinking, and yet he must always think of it as if he had it in its entirety. This brings him to the point of clowning. He must not deny his clownish traits, least of all since they alone can give him hope for what is denied for him. Philosophy is the most serious of things, but then again it is not that serious. A thing that aims at what it is not a priori and not authorised to control - such a thing according to its own concept, is simultaneously part of a sphere beyond control, a sphere tabooed by conceptuality. To represent the mimesis it supplanted, the concept has no other way than to adopt something mimetic in its own conduct, without abandoning itself.[80]

This appears to be exactly what Derrida defined, in his words, as "attributing meaning to the absence of meaning", as equating philosophy with poetry, and as "minor play". Is not Adorno not therefore vulnerable to the criticism Derrida made of Hegel? For Derrida, what Adorno describes is the *poetic* moment in philosophy, and we will recall that he asserts "The poetic is that which in every discourse which can open itself up to the absolute loss of its sense, to the

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[79] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 12.
[80] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 14.

(non)base of the sacred, of non-meaning, of un-knowledge or of play..."[81] What we need to hold on to is that what Adorno defines as the "nonconceptual" remainder in an object is represented completely differently by Derrida. For Derrida the "site" of the "non-philosophical" is the "poetic" moment in philosophy. Once defined thus, the "non-philosophical" cannot be in discourse, *qua* the unity of reflective and speculative judgement. On the contrary, it is only in Hegel's metaphorical language. Derrida had located "play" as something illicit in philosophy, something revealed by laughing at it from the outside, from *reading* philosophy as poetic. Adorno sees the "nonconceptual" beyond the philosophical, in the labour of philosophical *production*, in the deployment of the philosophical judgement itself. Again, this is the non-philosophical moment in philosophy, which is not therefore necessarily poetic. This, in turn, in Adorno maintains the link, broken in Derrida, between production and play. Derrida argued that in philosophy, "the desire for identity" had become identified with philosophical labour. From his perspective, the antidote to the desire for identity is the opposite of philosophical labour, namely play. For Adorno, the playful in philosophy is the moment of its production, which is the production of concepts, despite the post-Hegelian acknowledgement of their inadequacy. That is to say, Adorno is being, or trying to be Hegel's system and Bataille's laughter. For Derrida, this is a question of bringing together the philosophical and the poetic. For Adorno, it is a question of deploying the philosophical judgement in the knowledge that it is inadequate.

This needs to be qualified, and explained. Philosophy is not just about the production of concepts. Neither is the production of concepts, in itself, playful. We will recall that it was argued that in Hegel the idea of philosophical form *qua* speculative coherence is inconceivable without making specific reflective judgements about specific things. Adorno

[81] Jaques Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy", p. 261.

holds to this inseparability, but emphasizes how important it is for particular judgements to be what he calls "stringent". In philosophy,

> Its integral, nonconceptually mimetic moment of expression is objectified only by presentation in language...To philosophy expression and stringency are not to dichotomous possibilities. They need each other. Expression is relieved of its accidental character by thought, on which it toils as thought toils on expression. Only an expressed thought is succinct, rendered succinct by its presentation in language; what is vaguely put is poorly thought. Expression compels stringency in what it expresses.[82]

Stringency is the need for the concept, as understood from the perspective of "mind" described earlier, to strive for the most adequate possible correspondence between judgement and object. This specifically philosophical demand for such adequacy obviously does not just imply doing philosophy as opposed to poetry, it means doing philosophy well. Now, in the context of Adorno's project, doing philosophy well means not just making judgements about the adequacy of concepts in relation to their objects, it also means understanding the concept to be inadequate. This means that philosophical reflection must always be straining at the leash in the way it expresses itself. This "expression" is not an intentionally generated disruption of "discursive" form on the basis of some global judgement that the realm of the transconceptual can be only grasped by poetic means. "Intentionally or not, every judgement - even an analytical one, as shown by Hegel - carries with it the claim to predicate something that is not simply identical with the mere concept of the subject."[83] Thus, the non-conceptual in the concept is generated out of the stringent demand to posit truth claims and make judgements that can be evaluated. Here Adorno makes a very significant series of claims:

> Only the truth can really be philosophically understood. Our fulfilling concurrence in the judgement in which we understand something is the same as a decision about true and false. If we do not personally judge the stringency or nonstringency of a theorem, we do not understand it. The theorem's claim of such stringency is its own content of meaning, the very thing that is to be understood.

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[82] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 18.
[83] *Negative Dialectics*. p. 71.

> This distinguishes the relation of understanding and judgement from the usual order of time. The fact that we can no more understand without judging or judge without understanding invalidates the schema that the solution is the judgement and the problem is only the question based on understanding. What is transmitted here is the fibre of the so called philosophical demonstration, a mode of proof that contrasts with the mathematical model. And yet that model does not simply disappear, for the stringency of a philosophical thought requires its mode of proceeding to be measured by the forms of inference. Philosophical proof is the effort to give statements a binding quality by making them commensurable with the means of discursive thinking.[84]

Now, this is written in Chapter 1 of *Negative Dialectics*, and in that context Adorno is dismantling Heidegger, so this can be read as a critique of Heidegger's congenital inability to claim anything about Being except in negative terms. For Adorno, Heidegger's idea of "Being" is very simple. it is just wrong, deriving, as we have seen, from a hypostatized representation of reason. This is why "Being" cannot be grasped. At the same time, the above quotation is a condensed account of Adorno's understanding of the architecture of the philosophical judgement. In making a philosophical judgement about the adequacy of the correspondence between concept and object, we are behaving as though this can be true. It is here that we make judgements about the stringency of a judgement. Now, we have seen that the necessity for making stringent judgements derives from the claim that the judgement does not simply stand in an isolated relation to its object. Rather the stringent expression of the judgement is associated with philosophical expression. To grasp what this means we need to note how the second paragraph in the above quotation, suggests another way of judging the concept, namely its "binding quality" within discursive thought. We have noted that, for Derrida, discursive thought is completely resistant to the *poetic*. It must therefore be rejected and disrupted by poetic play. Adorno's discussion of the discursive significance of philosophy takes a superficially similar direction.

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[84] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 64.

A great deal of Adorno's critique of Heidegger takes the form of an extended consideration of the philosophical system, and this indicates the scope of Adorno's thinking about discursive thought. Again he is in a paradoxical position, because although he repeatedly distances himself from Hegel, he also repeatedly emphasises the importance of some sort of systematic thinking. At one point he quotes d'Alembert as differentiating between *l'esprit de système* and *l'esprit systèmatique*, and indirectly defends the latter saying "...it does not only satisfy the bureaucrats' desire to stuff all things into their categories."[85] He continues, more strongly, "To comprehend a thing itself, not just to fit and register it in its system of reference, is nothing but to perceive the individual moment in its immanent connection with others."[86] So while Adorno seems to be allowing and defending the idea of systematic thinking as representing the "immanent connection of all things", he remains dubious and goes on, predictably, to criticise Hegel: "No matter how dynamically a system may be conceived, if it is in fact a closed system, to tolerate nothing outside its domain, it will become a positive infinity - in other words, finite and static...Bluntly put, closed systems [vis Hegel's] are bound to be finished."[87] So, if closed systems are counter-productive, what is the alternative for systematic thinking? Adorno writes,

> consciousness would have to immerse itself in the phenomena on which it takes its stand. This would, of course, effect a qualitative change in dialectics. Systematic unity would crumble. The phenomenon would not remain a case of its concept, as it does to Hegel, despite all pronouncements to the contrary. The thought would be burdened with more toil and trouble than Hegel defines as such, because the thought he discusses always extracts from its objects only that which is thought already. Despite the program of self-yielding, the Hegelian thought finds satisfaction in itself; it goes rolling along, how ever often it may urge the contrary. If the thought really yielded to the object, if its attention were on the object, not on its category, the very objects would start talking under the lingering eye.[88]

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[85] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 24.
[86] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 25.
[87] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 27.
[88] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 27.

It is at moments like this that *Negative Dialectics* runs into a wall because it simply cannot continue to demonstrate what this anti-systematicity might imply since it is a necessarily logically abstract form. To go further, he needs to demonstrate what the collapse of philosophical systematicity might imply. *Aesthetic Theory*, whose writing was interrupted to write *Negative Dialectics*, can be read as an example of what Adorno is abstractly indicating.

The basic difference between Adorno's and Derrida's anti-systematicity, and their notion of mimesis implied therein, can be summarised with reference to the following description of deconstruction:

> a certain mimicry and pretension to systematicity is already required if deconstruction is to find a foothold in the discourse it seeks to deconstruct. Something else than antisystematical thought must, consequently, be at stake for deconstruction. Would we say that in a Heideggerian fashion it is bent to thinking systematicity in a more originary manner? Although Derrida would certainly acknowledge that such an operation is indispensable, deconstruction, as its definition suggests, cannot be thought of as a search for essences, however originary. Deconstruction is concerned, on the contrary, with determining the limits (the conditions of impossibility) of the possibility of systematicity and system formation.[89]

In other words, the moment of mimesis for Derrida is a function of its relation to another text, a philosophical text, at the boundary of whose systematicity Derrida hopes to find what he is looking for. Against this, for Adorno, the un-thought of by philosophy is not to be found by looking at philosophy and identifying a gap where its system prohibits it from thinking further. Rather, it is in the concrete object, which philosophy fails to represent. It follows that Adorno's philosophical mimesis is not just mimetic of other philosophy, although, like Derrida, Adorno is constantly defining himself against other philosophers. Rather, his philosophy seeks to be mimetic of the objects it seeks to represent. For Adorno, the bounds of philosophical systematicity are produced and revealed in the stringent

[89] Rodolphe Gasché, "Infrastructures and Systematicity", p. 7.

deployment of philosophical judgement of the particular phenomenon. Through this stringency, the philosophical judgement discovers itself to be unable to contain the non-philosophical. This is not a disaster for Adorno; rather, in *Aesthetic Theory*, philosophy is understood as only ever a partial system of representation. Art, which is the object of representation in *Aesthetic Theory*, is not susceptible to sufficient philosophical definition. It is mediated by its own history, reification, and its medium. Thus the failure of reason in *Aesthetic Theory* generates an anti-systematicity which may appear playful, but this playfulness is a function of the stringency of rationally deployed reason, which has an understanding of its necessity, and its inability to represent properly.

Reading and writing philosophical form: Adorno, Heidegger and Derrida

In this chapter we have looked at various manifestations of the idea of philosophical form as literary form, and demonstrated that the form of *Aesthetic Theory* is not usefully thought of this way. To conclude this chapter I will summarize the most important points and come back to the problem of reading *Aesthetic Theory* in the light of what has been argued.

In the conflict between the analytical tradition and deconstruction, at issue is the apparent embeddedness of philosophy in the "literary". Within the tradition of criticism of post-Hegelian philosophy, it has been widely recognized that, faced with the assertion that transcendent critique[90] is an impossibility, two alternatives present themselves.[91] Firstly, the reader assimilates the terms of the argument in question, criticizing it from "within". In doing so, however s/he appears vulnerable to the criticism of lacking critical distance. Secondly, the

[90] This assumes the critic can take a position outside the position criticized, which both Adorno and Heidegger prohibit in different ways and to different degrees.

[91] See, for example, the Preface and Introduction to D.White, *Heidegger and the Language of Poetry* which discusses of the author's attempts to deal with the problem as it is perceived to impact on his analysis of Heidegger's attitude to poetry.

critic remains attached to the premise s/he brought to the work, and becomes vulnerable to the charge of congenital misrepresentation. Making a related point about the dilemma generated by Adorno's anti-systematicity, Paul Crowther says of any attempt to discuss Adorno that "a systematic exposition of his work will be at odds to some degree with Adorno's own most cherished insight. Yet if one is not systematic in exposition and analysis, one runs the risk of simply mimicking the master and remaining at the level of obscurity."[92] This kind of dilemma is genuinely inescapable, and we need to acknowledge it as such when reading thinkers like Adorno and Heidegger, but its apparent finality can be somewhat mitigated.

If instead of trying to face the dilemma head on, we consider the implications of accepting or rejecting the unfamiliar standards by which Adorno and Heidegger operate, than a different series of possibilities emerge. One way to do this is to acknowledge that in itself, Heidegger's claim that "language is the matrix of thought" is not that difficult to grasp or accept. It is only when its ramifications for doing philosophy are thought through that the complicated implications of taking it seriously emerge. This thinking through the implications of a philosophical premise is closely related to the idea of philosophical "rhythm" introduced earlier. Such thinking through identifies the premise of an argument, without necessarily accepting it. This thinking through evaluates the extent to which implications of a philosophical premise are adequately worked out. It is with this idea of reading in mind, which is the idea of *immanent* critique, that we need to proceed.[93]

The possibility of immanent critique rests on the assumption that the argument being read is attempting to be internally rationally consistent. Only as such is it possible to trace

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[92] Paul Crowther, review of 'Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*: The Redemption of Ilusion,' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 33 (Oct 1993), p.397.

[93] Zuidervaart discusses different methods of philosophical reading in Lambert Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1991), pp. xvii - xxiv.

through the development of a rational train of thought. If it is the case that a philosophical text becomes literary or poetic, it will not be susceptible to immanent reading because it renounces the truthfulness of rational coherence. A different explanation for the impossibility of immanent reading would be if a philosophical argument refuses the idea of a beginning. With no obvious starting point, or rather, with many different starting points, immanent critique cannot derive the meaning of every claim by virtue of that claim's place within a "pristine unity". Such critique risks loosing the thread, going down blind alleys, or misrepresenting a work by giving a partial reading of it. I have argued that Heidegger and Derrida are philosophically unreadable for the first reason. The difficulty of reading *Aesthetic Theory* is, at least partially explainable, by the second. At the same time, it is clear that at times Heidegger and Derrida do argue in very rational ways. To make the difference between Heidegger and Derrida, on the one hand, and Adorno on the other, we need to consider how the rational and readable and the irrational and unreadable are configured. Consider the following description of the contrast between the ideas of thought as "speculation" and "reflection":

> *Speculation* stands opposed to *reflection*, a method of thought which has to do with something given, and appropriates the same by continued analysis and syntheses of its elements. If *speculative* stand thus opposed to *reflective* thinking, it must necessarily belong to the former not to set out from anything given as its subject, but from determinations from which thought finds in itself as the necessary and primary ground of all being as of all thinking. In this sense, all *speculative* thinking is of an *à priori*, and all reflective thinking of an *à posteriori* nature.[94]

The crucial difference here is that "reflection...has to do with something given", while "speculation" has to do with "determinations from which thought finds in itself". What "speculative thought" is, is as a mode of thought which, in paying attention to its

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[94] William Fleming, *The Vocabulary of Philosophy, Mental, Moral, and Metaphysical: with Quotations and References; For the use of Students*, (Philadelphia: Smith, English & Co, 1860), p. 486. Quotation from Julius Müller *Christian Doctrine of Sin*, trans. Palesford, (Edinburgh, 1852).

determinations, *constructs itself.* What does it mean that speculative thought "constructs itself"? I have argued that Heidegger and Derrida are sometimes thoroughly speculative in this sense. That is to say, they posit the premise that, for example, "language is the matrix of thought" and derive from it an internally consistent series of claims that are mutually determining. Both, however, reach a speculative conclusion that speculative thinking is inadequate, and thereby start thinking in a non-philosophical way, which both construe as some kind of synthesis of philosophical and poetic thinking. This makes them not only difficult to read, but also makes judgements about the value of what they are doing, difficult, because like Hegel, the speculative unity by which they arrive at and deploy their irrationalism is hard to fault.

Although the above definition makes a hard distinction between reflective and speculative thought, the great assertion of Hegel's philosophy is to be valid as *reflection* and *speculation.* His philosophy makes two inseparable kinds of claim to be right about the world. One is the familiar idea that philosophy makes specific claims to truth which rely on correspondence between a judgement and its object. The other is that as Hegel makes these claims, in the process of his argument they configure themselves into a relationship of mutually sustaining determinations through becoming a speculative unity. In this latter sense, Hegel claims a speculative truth which reveals itself in the thinking through of the reflective truth claims of his arguments. A symptom of the inseparability of these two orders of truth is the suggestion, often repeated in arguments about the proper mode of Hegel's reception, that it is impossible to take a piecemeal approach to his thought. One can criticise the specific claims Hegel made, for example about the death of art, and say he was demonstrably wrong in this. At the same time, to criticise such specifics is to destabilise the dynamic unity formed by their mutually supporting relation to other truth claims he makes. To say Hegel is wrong

about art is necessarily to say there is a mismatch within the total speculative construction, or that the whole thing is wrong. Both kinds of claim to truth are mutually dependent, and stand and collapse simultaneously. The trouble is that it is extraordinarily difficult to trip Hegel up on grounds of speculative inconsistency. Assessed on the criteria of rationality which operates to hold together Hegel's system of determinations, his *Aesthetics*, for example, is literally perfect. It is completely rationally consistent with itself and immune to deconstruction. Hegel's system is completely readable because every single implication is completely thought through. This is to say that it is possible to "stay with" Hegel's argument all the way through, so the problem of how to read Hegel literally solves itself. Equally, the correspondence between the speculative structure of Hegel's system and the world rests on Hegel's claim to be speculatively coherent. This coherence then perfectly replicates the world *qua* a rationally perfect system. As one reader of Hegel succinctly puts it of Hegel's system,

> Hegel, as both Hegelians and anti-Hegelians argue, has offered the greatest solution to, or at least formulation of, the problem of representation. According to Hegel's unification of logic and ontology, the "world," "reality," "the absolute," can be represented truthfully because the representation and the thing represented are not separate entities linked arbitrarily by a philosopher's subjectivity; rather, things and thought are engaged in a common movement toward self representation.[95]

Hegel manages to present us with a scenario where if we reject any aspect of his philosophy, even a single truth claim, we are bringing the whole thing down. If we do so, we must subscribe to the following: concepts are inadequate, philosophy cannot be completely rationally consistent with itself, and the world is not subject to rational determination, either reflectively or speculatively. Hegel's philosophy is so powerful that its collapse leaves the possibility of philosophy in real doubt.

> I would claim that Hegel's approach to representation is powerful, and limited, precisely because it is the first to think through "reality" in terms of the categories of and conditions that underlie Western theories and practices

[95] John. H. Smith, *The Spirit and Its Letter: Traces of Rhetoric in Hegel's Philosophy of Bildung*, (Ithaca: Cornell Universoty Press, 1988), p.x.

> of representation. The power of the argument lies in its circular self-reflexivity: Hegel has justified his philosophy by attributing the conditions of its representation to the object of representation.[96]

Picking up the pieces and continuing to do philosophy having demolished the Hegelian system acquires a novel degree of tendentiousness. Now, in as much as Adorno adheres to the principle of the necessary reflective and speculative unity of philosophy, it follows that the way the denial of the sufficiency of reason is played out will be of a different order of anti-systematicity than Heidegger's and Derrida's. Its condition of readability and the possibility of making judgements about it will be different from Heidegger and Derrida. That is to say, where in *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno does not make philosophical sense, it is because he understands that philosophy has gone as far as it can in describing an object. It does not then become irrational, his writing does not become *poetic*. Rather, it seeks to complete what reason aspires to do, which is adequately to represent the object. Thus Adorno's anti-philosophical tendencies are moves into modes of describing art which are more usually associated with art history - art with reference to its own history, to its function in society, and to how its medium is different from philosophy. This might seem very prosiac by comparison to Heidegger's attempts to take up residence in the House of Being, and to Derrida's *létterature*. Indeed, it is, but that is the point. For Adorno, it is possible and necessary to think much further and harder about the nonidentical than Heidegger or Derrida understand, because the nonidentical is the concrete phenomenon, mediated by the contingencies of its production and reception.

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[96] John. H. Smith, *The Spirit and Its Letter*, p.x.

Chapter IV

AESTHETIC THEORY AS PHILOSOPHICAL MIMESIS

This chapter discusses *Aesthetic Theory* as philosophical mimesis. There is an important difference between Adorno's *deployment* of philosophical mimesis and his *theory* of mimesis in art. This chapter looks at the former, the following chapter the latter.

For Adorno, the grounds on which art and philosophy meet is the concrete. An indication of what "the concrete" is can be suggested by saying that it is the moment when philosophically deployed reason encounters its own inadequacy. Adorno's response to this inadequacy is the idea of the "movement of the concept". This can be construed as a movement by philosophy towards something, and a marking of time, i.e., remaining in the same place. Together, these two ideas of movement can be construed as a preliminary definition of "philosophical mimesis". In *Aesthetic Theory*, philosophically deployed reason is responding to its inadequacy in describing art. *Aesthetic Theory* is mimetic of art because it is a movement towards art, and a marking of time, because that movement is never completed. This marking of time figures as a consciously maintained anxiety about the inadequacy of *Aesthetic Theory qua* philosophy *and* a deliberate maintenance of the distinction between philosophy and art.

As well as being mimetic of art in these terms, *Aesthetic Theory* is a theory of how art relates to the world. This theory of art will be properly explained in subsequent chapters, but aspects of it need developing now. This is so, is because, as a mimetic representation of art, philosophy takes on aspects of art's shape. It follows that if we have some idea of the shape art takes, we will better be able to understand the philosophy.

Schematically speaking, for Adorno, art is an orientation towards the "appearance of natural beauty." Art cannot directly or intentionally represent the "appearance of natural beauty". It can only do so obliquely. Indeed, this task is so problematic that it cannot achieve an adequate representation of the "appearance of natural beauty." If art is to have any success, it needs the collaboration of philosophy. Now, the form the collaboration between art and philosophy takes involves something like philosophical reflection "retracing" the trajectory of the work of art in its attempts to assimilate the "appearance of natural beauty". This is necessary because art has to try to make the "appearance of natural beauty" "determinate"; to do so, however, is to negate what the "appearance of natural beauty" is i.e.. "appearance". This mutually dependent dynamic of art and philosophy means that the scheme adopted here of making a distinction between philosophical mimesis, and mimesis in art, is ultimately going to be misleading. All the same it is a necessary distinction to make, and as has been suggested, *Aesthetic Theory* is uneven. So sometimes the relation between philosophy and art is very obviously inextricable, sometimes less so.

In the previous chapter, the way Adorno's philosophical mimesis was discussed inevitably placed heavy emphasis on its being *unlike* art and especially unlike the idea of the "literary". Having done this we now need to bring back the notion of a very close relationship between philosophy, language and art. This should not be surprising, given that the something of which philosophy is being mimetic, in *Aesthetic Theory* is art. To re-approach *Aesthetic Theory* in this manner, we need to reconfigure the terms of the argument of the previous chapter. As was made plain, the ambiance of deconstruction is of little help in reading *Aesthetic Theory*. To affect this reorientation, I will refer to one of Gadamer's arguments. Gadamer is ultimately very different from Adorno, but as an odd mixture of

Hegel and Heidegger, his thinking about the relation between art, language, and philosophy is a useful foil against which to develop aspects of Adorno's argument, hitherto neglected.

Gadamer: Philosophy and Poetry

In his short paper "Philosophy and Poetry", Gadamer makes a distinction between Natural Speech, on the one hand, and Philosophical and Poetic Language on the other. The important difference between these two categories is that in Natural Speech, the problem of meaning is not held in question. There are two reasons for this. The first is that natural speech always exists in a particular living context which gives it meaning. Second, this context is usually functional, so the adequacy of language is not judged in terms of what it directly signifies, but in terms of its relation to the language of that functional context. In Poetry and Philosophy, by contrast, Gadamer sees a quite different relation between language and what it signifies: "The language of poetry and philosophy on the other hand can stand by itself, bearing its own authority in the detached text that articulates it".[1] Another way of putting this, is that philosophical and poetic language seem to sustain their meaning in a condition of autonomy from their context, not shared by every day language. To illustrate this capacity of Poetic Language, Gadamer cites Valéry

> Valéry contrasted the poetic word with the everyday use of language in a striking comparison that alludes to the old days of the gold standard: everyday language resembles small change which like our own paper money, does not actually possess the value that it symbolizes. The famous gold coins still in use before the First World War, on the other hand, actually possessed as metal the value that was imprinted upon them. In a similar way, the language of poetry is not a mere pointer that refers to something else, but, like a gold coin, is what it represents.[2]

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[1] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, trans. N.Walker, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 133.
[2] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, p. 133.

Going on to describe the quite different way philosophical language separates itself from its context, Gadamer uses the example of the Platonic dialogue. He argues that this form does not simply present itself to consciousness, but "involves the reader in the dialogue that it portrays". In other words, the meaning of language as it appears in the philosophical text is made self-sufficient through its thoughtful internalization by the reader. In this way, the truth of Philosophical Language does not "stand" as does the Poetic. Rather, Philosophical truth is discursive, always on the move, and depends on being a part of a dynamic process between reader and text but, because this is a process, such truth can never be finally grasped.

If their differences from Natural Speech unite Poetry and Philosophy, Gadamer notes "their proximity seems in the end to collapse into the extremes of the word that stands, and the word that fades into the unsayable".[3] What then is their relation? His principal technique is to modify the extreme claims he has made for both Poetic and Philosophical language, identifying common features. The first similarity he recognizes is that, considered differently, and despite Valéry's extravagant claims, Poetry, like Philosophy, does not become identical with contingent reality, but excludes it. In this sense, the Poetic is seen as actually similar to philosophy, in so far as it does not literally coincide with reality in the way that Valéry suggests. Having made this observation, Gadamer now goes on to argue that, despite the apparent failure of the Poetic to "stand", it can be argued that it generates the kind of truth associated with Philosophical Language. To make this point Gadamer compares the "extreme cases" of lyric poetry and Hegel's dialectic. He returns to the comparison with Every Day Language, distinguishing lyric poetry from it, arguing that their difference resides in the extent to which lyric poetry amplifies

[3] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, p. 133.

> a tension between the tonal and the significative forces of language as they encounter and change place with one another... There is not a single word in a poem that does not intend what it means. Yet at the same time, it sets itself back upon itself to prevent it slipping into prose and the rhetoric that accompanies it. This is the claim and legitimation of "pure poetry." [4]

It is not that lyric poetry is distinguished from every day language through its form, but it is the extent to which it exhibits a tension between "the *tonal* and *significative* forces of language". Gadamer now goes to his example of philosophical language. Here

> The problem is not that everyday prose threatens to infiltrate the language of the concept, but that the logic of the proposition takes us in the wrong direction. As Hegel expressed the matter, "The proposition in the form of a judgement is not suited to express speculative truths." [5]

Philosophy, in other words, defines itself through a different problematic from that of poetic language. Here the issue is not about achieving and maintaining a difference from every day language, but that the means of philosophical language is inadequate to its ends. Gadamer is quick to emphasize that while he is invoking Hegel's dialectic, "It is the common presupposition of all philosophizing that philosophy as such does not posses a language that is adequate to the task assigned to it." As in all speech, philosophy cannot avoid the propositional form, but the inadequacy of the proposition does not mean that philosophy will always fail, because the proposition is not the means of expressing philosophical truth. Rather, quoting Plato, Gadamer seeks to distance philosophical language from this conception of its inevitably futile deployment of the proposition, by emphasizing its autonomy:

> Philosophy moves exclusively in the medium of the concept: "in Ideas, through Ideas, toward Ideas." The relation that these concepts have to one another is not explicated through "external reflection", which envisages the concept from without, that is from this or that "point of view." Because of the arbitrariness of this way of looking at the matter, where one attribute or

[4] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, p. 136.
[5] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, p. 137.

> another is predicated of a subject, Hegel describes such "external reflection" as precisely the "sophistry of perception."[6]

In other words, like lyric poetry, philosophical argument is not important for what it signifies directly through "external reflection". Rather,

> the medium of philosophy is speculation as the mirror-play of the categories through which the matter of thought is immanently and dynamically articulated. It is immanent because as being and as spirit it tends towards the concept intended by thought as a concrete totality.[7]

These two sentences are extremely important, and somewhat opaque. Gadamer replaces the significatory capacity of philosophy with an idea of "the mirror-play of the categories"; truth content of philosophy derives not from the truth claims it makes, but from the pattern of its argument which, *qua* dynamic, internally expresses the matter of thought.

Now, as it turns out, Gadamer's argument in defining the language of poetry and philosophy has taken on a kind of extreme anti-realism which is reminiscent of deconstruction. Against the apparently satisfactory signifying of every day language, poetry defines itself, not because it signifies more truthfully, but because it makes explicit the tension between the tonal and significatory capacity of its language. Likewise, philosophy fails to signify with the propositional form, but its truth resides in the mimetic capacity of its dynamic argument. Without engaging the terms of deconstruction, it looks as though Gadamer is making claims about the relative priority of form over direct signification. Gadamer acknowledges this problem, and seems to distance himself from Hegel and Mallarmé (his example of a lyric poet), but importantly goes on to emphasize the common significance of the kinds of tension he has identified in both poetry and philosophy. Of Mallarmé, he writes

> he was able to capture in language the encounter with nothingness as well as the invocation of the Absolute. Self-bestowal and self-withdrawal - such a

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[6] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, p. 137.
[7] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, p. 137.

> dialectic of uncovering and withdrawal seems to hold sway in the mystery of language, both for poets and for philosophers, from Plato to Heidegger.[8]

This last sentence is important, because it is here that Gadamer the critical thinker seems to pull up. The "uncovering and withdrawal" constitutes the "mystery of language". It is this contradiction between the significatory and tonal capacity of lyric poetry which Gadamer will not further dissect. The same dynamic of "uncovering and withdrawal" holds for the different contradiction inherent in the philosophical form. This has far-reaching implications for Gadamer's understanding of the possibility of truth in philosophy and poetry.

> Thus both the poetical and philosophical types of speech share a common feature: they cannot be "false". For there is no external standard against which they might correspond. Yet they are far from arbitrary. They represent a unique kind of risk, for they can fail to live up to themselves. In both cases this is not because they fail to respond to the facts, but because their words prove to be "empty". In the case of poetry, this occurs when instead of sounding right, it merely sounds like other poetry or like the rhetoric of every day life. In the case of philosophy, this occurs when philosophical language gets caught up in purely formal argumentation or degenerates into empty sophistry.
>
> In both these inferior forms of language - the poem that is not a poem because it does not have its "own" tone, and the empty formulae of a thinking that does not touch on the matter of thought - the word breaks. Where the word fulfills itself and becomes language, we must take it at its word.

With that, Gadamer concludes. His slipping into a kind of Heidegerrian elusiveness begins to read like a deferral of critical thought, rather than thought coming up against an object to which it had no access. Although Gadamer is at pains to emphasize the mystery of language as inhering in the dialectic of "uncovering and withdrawal", his concluding paragraphs give far greater importance to withdrawal. When he claims that philosophy and poetry "cannot be 'false'" he radically underplays the signifying capacities of language, and this is directly related to his weak claim for the possible truth of art and philosophy.

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[8] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, p. 139.

Seeing the connection between Gadamer's weak claim to truth and the extent to which he leaves aspects of his argument unresolved is important. At the same time, an argument which makes strong truth claims about language, like deconstruction or analytical philosophy as either "the encounter with nothingness" or the "invocation of the Absolute", will be predetermined to privilege one means of articulation (i.e. philosophy or literature) over another. In contrast, Gadamer's argument begins with a degree of openness about the nature of the relation between philosophical and poetic truth, but by the end his argument degenerates into obscurity about the difference between the true and the false, which seems too high price to pay for his flexible attitude. Adorno is acutely aware of this mediating relation between the kinds of truth claim we make and the degree of commitment we have for the means of its expression. As we have seen however, "awareness" on its own is probably not enough. It is the premises with which an argument begins, which in a large measure limits the range of available insights into a problem. When discussing Adorno's idea of philosophical truth, we need to remember that it is always in the context of his strong claim for the idea that experience is reified, as described in the previous chapter. At the same time, because philosophy is understood as potentially having a degree of "autonomy" from reified experience, and from art, its truth value is not thinkable as sufficiently described as determined by either his theory of experience, or his theory of art. This means that the archetectonics of Adorno's argument, as they impinge on his understanding of the possibility of philosophical truth, are not epistemologically predetermined to emphasize philosophical language as either "the encounter with nothingness" or the "invocation of the Absolute". At the same time Adorno makes stronger and more developed truth claims than Gadamer allows, and does so without curtailing the possibility of the truth of art.

Philosophical Mimesis

Although he does not name it, Gadamer's definition of the relation between philosophical language and truth can be construed as defining philosophy as mimetic:

> the medium of philosophy is speculation as the mirror-play of the categories through which the matter of thought is immanently and dynamically articulated. It is immanent because as being and as spirit it tends towards the concept intended by thought as a concrete totality. [9]

We will recall that this definition is offered in the context of Gadamer's diagnosis of the failure of philosophical propositions to signify. Indeed, he invokes Plato and Hegel to argue that the idea of vertical meaning between philosophical proposition and the world is a specious understanding of philosophical truth:

> Philosophy moves exclusively in the medium of the concept: "in Ideas, through Ideas, toward Ideas." The relation that these concepts have to one another is not explicated through "external reflection", which envisages the concept from without, that is from this or that "point of view." Because of the arbitrariness of this way of looking at the matter, where one attribute or another is predicated of a subject, Hegel describes such "external reflection" as precisely the "sophistry of perception." [10]

Gadamer's argument is very useful in beginning to identify Adorno's idea of philosophical mimesis, but, as I have already indicated, it is crucially different from Adorno's position. This is because the kind of philosophical mimesis Gadamer diagnoses is detached from any strong idea of truth. Inseparable from this, Gadamer's definition of philosophical mimesis takes place in the context of the denial that philosophy can make truth claims in any traditional sense: mimesis is thus construed as an *alternative* to direct signification. Philosophy becomes a kind of parallel existence which, within the terms of its own rules and conceptual conventions, imitates the world. This autonomy is not total, however, because philosophy is both "being and spirit". This is Hegelian terminology and indicates that, while philosophy is

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[9] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, p. 137.
[10] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, p. 137.

understood as a particular form of "being" i.e. experience at a moment in history, it also expresses something universal. This is to say that philosophy does have a direct relation to the world, beyond its imitative capacity. This is in so far as it has an unintentional relation to the historically situated context of its production.

Now, both kinds of relation between philosophy and world implicit in Gadamer's definition of philosophical mimesis hold for Adorno, and they need to be properly explained. At the same time, there is a third aspect of the relation between philosophy and its object in Adorno's argument which emphasizes the distinction I have already made between Adorno and Gadamer. In Adorno, philosophical mimesis is not just about the parallel imitation of the object, but a movement of the concept *towards* its object. That is to say, because for Adorno philosophy still has a signifying capacity, it is inadequate to think of philosophical mimesis as the horizontal configuration of a relation between concepts. This horizontal configuration of concepts simply parallels the object, whatever that might imply. Rather, the mimetic relation also pertains vertically, between concept and object. Now, as we have seen, Gadamer understands poetry and philosophy as operating within precisely this tension. The point is that Gadamer then goes on to resolve it, both in the claim that the concepts of philosophy should not be subjected to "external reflection" and in his claim that neither philosophy nor poetry can be "false", but simply judged in terms of whether they are internally consistent or "live up to themselves". What distances Adorno from Gadamer is that his engagement with philosophy does not allow for this resolution. He goes much further in pursuing the dialectic of "uncovering and withdrawal", which is to say he maintains its energy by giving more weight in his thought to "uncovering" (the signifying capacity of poetry and philosophy), within their dialectical construction. Adorno therefore understands philosophy and poetry as making strong and direct truth claims. This certainly means that philosophy and poetry can be

"false", but it also means that they can be "true" beyond the aloof, parallel truth, of Gadamer's argument.

One place to begin defining what this analysis of Adorno's position might imply for his deployment of philosophical mimesis, is early in *Negative Dialectics*. Here he says that philosophical thought "must strive, by means of the concept, to get beyond the concept." As Wellmer suggests, in an argument which I will return to later "In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno has tried to characterize this self-conquest of the concept as the incorporation of a "mimetic" moment into conceptual thought."[11] This does not explain any more clearly what philosophical mimesis might entail, but it does provide a basis for understanding its significance for Adorno. If we hold together the ideas of the "self-conquest of the concept" and "mimesis", we are at least thinking in the right direction.

In the previous chapter I suggested that mimesis is not only defined by its medium, in this case concepts, but also the object of imitation. This is one of the reasons why an abstract definition of mimesis is impossible, and it is also why it makes so little sense to read that philosophical thought "must strive, by means of the concept, to get beyond the concept." When we think of philosophical mimesis in the context of *Aesthetic Theory*, we are already containing the problem and making it more concrete because, as we have seen, we can assume that the objects of philosophical attention will be art. Indeed, Adorno is quite direct in providing a model for explaining what the philosophical mimesis of art might involve:

> There is no need for aesthetics to exorcise concepts and thereby put itself completely under the spell of its object. On the contrary, it must divest concepts of whatever externality they may have in relation to the particular work, trying to make them more germane. Hegel's analysis, in the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, of the movement of the concept is more apropos in aesthetics than in any other field.[12]

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[11] Albrecht Wellmer, 'Truth, Semblance, Reconciliation: Adorno's Aesthetic Redemption of Modernity', trans. M.Cooke, *Telos* 62 (Winter 1984-85), p. 91.
[12] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 259.

Now, this is informative and problematic because it opens up two different issues. First, is the question of what Adorno *does* in *Aesthetic Theory* to "divest concepts of whatever externality they may have in relation to the particular work, trying to make them more germane". What is the "movement" in the "movement of the concept"? Second, given that he practices philosophical mimesis as "the movement of the concept", what are the products of that movement? What are the specific truth claims he makes as a consequence?

In the following section, I consider what the "movement of the concept" is in *Aesthetic Theory*.

The "movement of the concept" in *Aesthetic Theory*

One of the things for which I criticized Gadamer, was the way his argument became elusive when he spoke of "mystery of language" as constituted by the dialectic of "uncovering and withdrawal". Now, Adorno is by no means hostile to this abstract idea of philosophical truth, but where he differs from Gadamer is that he is much less happy with the idea of "mystery". For Adorno, critical thought is more powerful than Gadamer seems to imply, and this means that where Gadamer diagnoses congenital elusiveness, Adorno takes concrete steps to pursue an issue. This means that philosophical mimesis, as Adorno practices it, is not an esoteric art, but a rational mode of procedure. The Draft Introduction[13] to *Aesthetic Theory* sets out the broad terms for such a procedure in the shape of a metacritique of traditional aesthetics, and the development of a series of alternative modes of practice for philosophical aesthetics. The inadequacies of traditional aesthetics are the impetus for this movement. He begins

> Like the idea of a philosophical system or philosophy of morals, the notion of a philosophical aesthetics seems awfully antiquated. This perception is not confined to artists and public opinion, both of which are indifferent to

[13] According to the editors this was to be dropped from the final version of *Aesthetic Theory*. Nonetheless, it sets the agenda for the book in uncharacteristically lucid terms and is thus an extremely useful aid to understanding the range of issues addresed in *Aesthetic Theory*.

> *Aesthetic Theory*. It is a sentiment one runs into even among university scholars.[14]

Now, Adorno is quite clear there are two different kinds of problem here. The "mystery" for traditional aesthetics, as it is for Adorno, is "the difficulty, if not impossibility, of understanding art by the means of a system of philosophical concepts."[15] As we have seen, Adorno understands this as an objective problem; traditional aesthetics cannot be blamed. Indeed, the problematic reputation of aesthetics derives, to an extent, from the context of its practice: "Among scholars, the mistrust of aesthetics has also something to do with the academic nature of the discipline. Why the lack of concern for aesthetic questions? Because there is a general institutionalised avoidance of uncertainty and controversy among academics."[16] This is a recurring theme throughout Adorno's work; in *Negative Dialectics* he suggests that the constraints of institutional convention militate against, even anticipate and pre-empt, posing certain kinds of problem "What may or may not be reflected, however urgent, is regulated by a method blithely modelled after current methods of exact science. Approved modes of proceeding, pure means, gain primacy over ends, the goals of cognition."[17]

Now, having said this, Adorno is also quite clear that philosophical aesthetics has problems which are not objective, resulting rather from erroneous modes of procedure, which can be corrected. It is here that we can think of the philosophical mimesis of *Aesthetic Theory* as involving a movement of the concepts of traditional aesthetics. What then is the problem with traditional aesthetics? It is

> the long standing dependency of aesthetic statements on epistemological positions, such that the problems of epistemology return directly in aesthetics, for the question of how the latter is able to interpret its objects depends on the kind of concept of objectivity epistemology happens to subscribe to. Now this

[14] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 456. (see p. 509.)
[15] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 456. (Adorno is quoting from a philosophical dictionary)
[16] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 458.
[17] *Negative Dialectics*, ?

> long established dependency is given by the subject matter of aesthetics itself and it is reflected in its very terminology.[18]

This is a section of the extended quotation from a philosophical dictionary definition of aesthetics, which takes up most of the first page of the Draft Introduction. In effect, it is arguing that philosophical aesthetics has always been a sub-discipline of epistemology. Whether we agree with or not, it sets Adorno up to delineate his alternative. It is clear that the issue is not so much the obvious argument that art cannot be thought of as epistemologically determined. Rather, it is the way philosophical aesthetics inherits epistemology's deportment towards to its object, which is not a useful paradigm of behaviour for philosophical aesthetics:

> The idea of the concrete which is the matrix of every work of art, indeed of every experiential orientation to beauty, makes it impossible when dealing with art to remove oneself from specific phenomena, as one is unfortunately accustomed to do in epistemology and ethics. A theory of the concrete would necessarily miss its aim which is the concrete object. One reason for the obsolescence of aesthetics then is its failure to face this problem squarely. Instead it has stuck to generalities that are both inadequate to concrete works of art and fixated on the value of immortality which it is itself mortal.[19]

What is key here Adorno's emphasis on "the concrete" as "the matrix of every work of art" and his assertion that "A theory of the concrete would necessarily miss its aim which is the concrete object." Adorno is asking for a relocation of the interest of philosophical aesthetics, away from a preoccupation with generalities, to "the concrete". What, then does Adorno mean by "the concrete"? In part, it is the way Adorno answers this question in arguments of *Aesthetic Theory* that makes him vulnerable to all those criticisms of his work as obsolete; what was "concrete" for Adorno, is no longer so now. At the same time, "the concrete" is not simply constituted by historically finite ideas; it is also a series of principles

[18] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 456. (see p. 509.)
[19] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 457.

for doing aesthetics that are less obviously susceptible to obsolescence. To understand what these principles of "the concrete" might be, we need to consider Hegel's *Aesthetics*.

Hegel describes three phases in the development of art the Symbolic (e.g. the pyramids), the Classical (e.g. Greek sculpture), and the Romantic (e.g. Romantic art), in that order.[20] Each is profoundly different from the other, over an above their obvious material and formal differences. This is because each art's understanding of itself in its relation to the Absolute is different, *and* the experience of what the Absolute is also different for each art. So, for example, Symbolic art has an extremely diffuse and abstract idea of the Absolute. Although its forms, like the Egyptian pyramids, are obviously solid in a material sense, they simply indicate or gesture towards spiritual content, rather than manifesting it directly "the correspondence of meaning and shape is always defective and must itself remain purely abstract."[21] Classic art, by contrast, is the perfect art: in Classical sculpture the human body "becomes the natural shape of the spirit" because "In classic art the concrete content is *implicitly* the unity of the divine nature with the human". In other words, the absolute is no longer incompletely understood and so is simply gestured toward. As the unity of the divine with the human, is directly manifested in the sculpture of the Greeks. The problem is that it is precisely this determination of spirit as "particular and human" that necessitates the dissolution of the classical art-form, because spirit cannot be properly understood in such terms. This leads into Romantic art, which like Symbolic art, only represents the Absolute in a diffuse way. The crucial difference here, however, is that in world historical terms, the absolute is now understood as "not susceptible of an adequate union with the external". In Symbolic art, spirit was alluded to in an abstract way because it was inadequately

[20] G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, vol. 1, p. 76-80.
[21] G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, vol 1, p. 77.

comprehended. In Romantic art, spirit is incompletely represented, but this is now because spirit is now understood as not susceptible to complete representation.

The point here is not to become absorbed in a discussion of Hegel's *Aesthetics*. Rather, I wish to underline how Hegel divides the history of art into discrete phases which are not simply formally different, but are so by virtue of having radically different kinds of experience and different understandings of their possible function and value in the world. In confronting art on these terms, Hegel's lectures on aesthetics (1820-29) were, at one level, a direct confrontation with Winckelmann. Winckelmann saw his own *History of Ancient Art* not just as a history and explanation of the progress and decline of Greek art, but as a "theoretical treatise, aiming to demonstrate, through the example of Greek art, what beauty was."[22] Hegel's aesthetics was the first attempt to describe the entire history of art, and while he broadly agreed with the terms of Winckelmann's argument, for Hegel Classicism was just one phase of art, rather than an absolute standard which could be universally extended. As we have seen, the way Hegel does this is to define each phase of art in terms of a) its own historically defined understanding of the Absolute and its relation to it, b) the perception of its broad purpose in the light of (a), c) the medium by which that purpose was carried out, and d)the realised end of that activity,[23] (these should not be construed in hierarchical order of importance). In each of the three phases of art Hegel describes, these factors are different and *mediated* and, as such, they produce radically different results. It is in this sense that we can begin to understand what Adorno means when he invokes the idea of "the concrete": it is that mediating constellation of moments which constitute the truth content of a work of art.

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[22] Ernst Gombrich, "Hegel and Art History", *Architectural Design* (1981), p.3.

[23] Here I am modifying Gary Shapiro's useful analysis of the way Hegel characterises all spiritual activity : "Typically, Hegel analyzes spiritual activities in terms of three aspects: the general idea or purpose, abstractly considered; the medium or means in which or by which the purpose is carried out; and the concrete or realised end of the activity." see Shapiro, Gary. "Hegel on Implicit and Dialectical Meanings of Poetry," in Steinkraus and Schmitz, (1980), p. 40-41.

Adorno takes from Hegel a hostility to the idea of a fixed epistemology and likewise understands experience to change through history. We have already seen that in place of epistemology, Adorno adopts "reification" as a historically limited theory of knowledge. In purely negative terms, this simply means Adorno abandons any aspirations to understand the possibility of truth in general, and of art in particular, beyond a particular set of theoretically defined historical limits. On the other hand, it this which enables him to engage reified experience as one of the mediating factors defining his "concrete" relation to art. The philosophical mimesis practised by Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory*, then, is this movement of the philosophical concept of experience in its relation to art. It moves away from a universal characterisation of the relation between philosophy and art towards a historically changing one. We can, therefore, with some hesitation, think of *Aesthetic Theory*'s with modern art as *roughly* analogous to one of the three main "episodes" in the history of art, as diagnosed by Hegel, in his *Aesthetics.*

This claim needs immediate qualification, and its implications will continue to be developed. In fact, on Hegel's own terms, only one thing which allows the comparison of the three orders of art he describes. It is that they are all insufficiently determinate representations of the Absolute, by comparison with his own, historically located, philosophy. Hegel the philosopher understands the absolute as dialectical; it is philosophy, as the supremely dialectical form, which is most adequate to the task of representing the Absolute as such.

If, as Adorno, one rejects the possibility of any such absolute perspective, philosophical or otherwise, then one will not just concentrate on a historically defined idea of art. In addition, there is no possibility of grasping the truth content of anything beyond the "concrete" conditions of one's own experience. We can criticise the narrow terms with which

Aesthetic Theory limits itself to specifically modern art, but without Hegel's all-seeing rational periscope, it is simply not possible to see definitively beyond the concreteness of one's own reified experience. The upside of this is that art is not subordinated to philosophy or vice versa. Neither is one made obsolete by the other and both can be understood as having its own autonomous, but mediated history.

The unacceptable by-product of Idealist philosophy's aspiration to produce definitive truth, its inevitable abstracting of its object, is short-circuited. In practical terms, the traditional scope of philosophical aesthetics, the isolation of those characteristics which unquestionably hold for aesthetic experience for all time, is simply abandoned, thereby avoiding a common criticism of universalising aesthetics:

> in truth the irrelevance of esthetic theory is due to the fact that it has often been a response to a particular body of art and of limited application to another order. Plato, Aristotle, Hume and Kant, powerful and systematic thinkers all were giving universal validity to thoughts suited to a very local art, so that in large measure, esthetic theory is a body of criticism concealed as such by the unacknowledged provincialisms of its authors..24

The idea that an aesthetic theory should aim to define a common truth content of all works of art, from cave paintings to the "Mona Lisa" to the "Demoiselles d'Avignon," is itself historicized by Adorno. The desire for art to be universal is "fixated on the value of immortality which it is itself mortal";

> As a theory that attempts to establish the laws of the beautiful once and for all... aesthetics has become as reactionary as the solemn pathos associated with a conception of art that elevates it above empirical reality and society into the absolute.25

By deliberately limiting the historical scope of his aesthetics Adorno, necessarily focuses his inquiry onto the specific characteristics of the possibility of the truth of art within those

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[24] Arthur Danto, *State of The Art*, (New York: Prentice Hall, 1987), p. 4

[25] T.W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature Vol 1*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 138.

limits. When he discusses *the* "truth content" of works of art, he describes how they are true in the context of reification. He does not discuss how art works might be *de facto* "True."

Returning then to the idea of *Aesthetic Theory* as philosophical mimesis of art, we can consider the move *from* the universal preoccupations of traditional aesthetics. This is simultaneously a move *to* the concrete experience of art under reification. This movement is one manifestation of the "movement of the concept" as it occurs in *Aesthetic Theory*. As I have already indicated, however, this movement of philosophical aesthetics is not simply a reorientation of the focus of its attention it implies the transformation of philosophical aesthetics itself. The necessary vulnerability of its own procedures is derived from Adorno's refusal to take refuge in Hegel's notion of sufficient reason. Sufficient reason preserves the shape of Hegel's argument, whatever the idiosyncrasies of its object. In an abstract and philosophical sense, for Adorno the impetus for the movement and transformation of his own aesthetics derives from his appreciation of Hegel's unfulfilled ambition to allow the object to speak.

The fulfilling of Hegel's philosophical imperative, however, is not in the gift of philosophy itself, but resides in other mediations. It would quite wrong, therefore, to think of *Aesthetic Theory* as the inevitable product of Adorno's critique of the Idealist's epistemological over-determination of aesthetics. Indeed, if it were, Adorno's arguments would simply be reproducing a negative image of the tendency in Idealist aesthetics to follow in the wake of Idealist epistemology. Adorno's alternative conception of the substance and function of aesthetics means that *Aesthetic Theory* has a variety of defining influences which the author explicitly defines.

Adorno acknowledges he is not working in a vacuum in his conviction that the discipline of philosophical aesthetics needs reconstruction, and cites a number of theorists

who initiate changes in aesthetics which he is able to build on. The three he mentions first are Benedetto Croce, Georg Lukács and Walter Benjamin, citing in particular Lukács' *Theory of the Novel*, Benjamin's treatise *Goethe's Elective Affinities* and *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. According to Adorno, these works have in common a 'radical nominalism' which is manifest in their concern with particular works of art. He writes,

> Hegel's programmatic idea - that knowing is giving oneself over to a phenomena rather than thinking about it from above - has become feasible in aesthetics with this turn to nominalism..."[26]

Moreover,

> Benjamin embraces the view that insights into the traditional problems of aesthetics, notably those of a metaphysical kind, can no longer be expected from a discussion of general principles but have to come from the realm of the particular in art, the particular being more than a mere specimen of the universal.27

By invoking Lukács, Croce and Benjamin, Adorno is implying that the transformation of aesthetics, away from the universal to the particular, is bigger than his own particular philosophical motivations. It is part of a wider dissatisfaction with the modes of procedure practised by Idealist aesthetics. This leads on to an important modification of his critique of Idealist aesthetics. While expressing reservations about the capacity of traditional aesthetics to deal with individual works of art, he does not denounce it out of hand. Rather, it is the changes that have taken place in art itself since Kant and Hegel formulated their theories which have damaged them, limiting their usefulness. Adorno historicizes their position, claiming that the specific conditions which define the art he is concerned with are different from those confronted by Kant and Hegel. He thereby puts certain art beyond the grasp of their aesthetics: "Getting back to the question of why aesthetics has abated, I would argue that, while some of this lack of concern stems from problems inherent in aesthetics as a

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[26] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 457.
[27] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 457.

discipline, the greater part is due to changes in its object, i.e. art."[28] The result of changes in art mean that,

> Putting it bluntly, we can say that Hegel and Kant were the last philosophers who could afford to write systematically on aesthetics without knowing anything about art. This was possible as long as art took its bearings from comprehensive norms which were accepted unquestioningly by the creative artist. Granted, there may never have been a single important work in which those norms were not in some way mediated or modified; somehow they proved to be larger than the individual works shaped after them. To the extent that great aesthetic thought conceptualized what was manifestly universal in art, it tended to be in harmony with it.[29]

Rejecting the idea that philosophical aesthetics is about the analysis and description of aesthetic experience in general, the issue for *Aesthetic Theory* is not to "solve" this problem, but to re-align it. This realignment must ensure that the difference between philosophical reflection and art is not predetermined in the way philosophical aesthetics understands that relation. The preceding argument is an example of this process Adorno has invoked a number of different reasons for the necessary transformation of Aesthetics. Certainly there are things congenitally wrong with the aesthetics of Kant and Hegel with which Adorno as a philosopher is preoccupied. Aditionally, however, he claims art has changed beyond the parameters their theories can compensate for. Other theorists have made similar moves to aesthetic nominalism. In responding to this variety of mediating factors, Adorno defines *Aesthetic Theory* as something which is no longer simply embedded in a tradition of philosophical arguments about art, but as something which is transforming itself into a different order of relation to art.

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[28] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 464.
[29] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 458.

Mutual Dependence of Aesthetics and Art

Albrecht Wellmer has discussed the respective mimetic capacities of art and philosophy in Adorno's thought. As a starting point, he takes Adorno's assertion in *Negative Dialectics* that philosophy must strive to use concepts to get beyond the limitations of the concept.[30] He continues,

> In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno has tried to characterise this self-conquest of the concept as the incorporation of a "mimetic" moment into conceptual thought. Rationality and mimesis must come together to deliver rationality from its irrationality. Mimesis is the name for those modes of behaviour which are receptive, expressive, and communicative in a sensuous fashion.[31]

In other words, philosophy is conceptual and, as such, it is limited in its capacity to represent experience. It must strive to get beyond this limitation, however, not by transforming itself into another medium, but by mobilizing the "mimetic" moment in its own conceptual resources. Wellmer now defines art as the opposite of philosophy. He says that art is "intellectualized mimesis, i.e., mimesis which has been both transformed and objectified by rationality". In other words, Wellmer claims that philosophy is rational, but has a mimetic moment, where art is mimetic with a rational moment. This begins to look as though art and philosophy are effectively collapsed into each other. Wellmer goes on to argue, however, that despite this "intertwining" of mimesis and reason as defining art and philosophy, they are distinct because the intertwining occurs from "opposite poles". What Wellmer is saying here can be clarified with reference to an aspect of Adorno's critique of Heidegger discussed earlier. Adorno remarks that "The substance of concepts is to them both immanent, as far as mind is concerned, and transcendent, as far as being is concerned."[32] We will recall that Adorno says Heidegger is wrong to identify concepts as wholly rational; to do so is to imply

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[30] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 15.
[31] Albrecht Wellmer, 'Truth, Semblance, Reconciliation: Adorno's Aesthetic Redemption of Modernity', p. 92.
[32] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 12.

mind and being as separable by reading concepts as pure mind. Given the inseparability of mind and being, it follows that concepts have both immanent and transcendent content. That is, concepts make specific rational truth claims that must be judged by mind. At the same time, the content of concepts is transcendent for being, because they leave a remnant in the object. It is because of this non-conceptual remnant in the object that philosophy has to deploy its mimetic moment. This, as we have seen, is the discursive form it takes as it evolves from the positing of stringent judgements. Now Wellmer's argument shows that this whole dynamic of philosophical mimesis takes on a new identity when it confronts art. What happens is that the dynamic of philosophical mimesis comes to be seen as mind, by comparison with art's being. In other words, the dynamic between the rational and sensuous modes within philosophy are externalized with the confrontation of philosophy with art. Thus far we have not discussed the mimetic capacity of art. To do so, we need to understand that art appears to philosophy in the light of its difference from philosophy, i.e. art as being, in contrast to philosophy as mind. Against this, art is like philosophy, because it is both mind and being. This is the reason for Wellmer's claim that art is mimesis that has been rationalized, where philosophy is reason with a mimetic moment. Now, the inseparability of reason and mimesis in philosophy and art, is translated to their contrasting identities in their relation to each other. That is to say, philosophy appears as mind in the light of its contrast with art, which in the light of philosophical reflection, appears as being. It is with an emphasis on the difference between philosophy as mind and art as being that Wellmer bases his argument. Thus he writes

> their relation to each other, a relation to two fragments of a non-reified spirit, is itself a relation between intuition and concept; a relationship to be sure which cannot be stabilized by the articulated unity of cognitive judgement. The presence of reconciling spirit in an unreconciled world can only be thought of aporetically.[33]

[33] Albrecht Wellmer, 'Truth, Semblance, Reconciliation: Adorno's Aesthetic Redemption of Modernity', p. 92.

Having just described art and philosophy as virtually identical in so far as they both "contain" mimetic and rational moments, Wellmer now describes them as "aporetic" in their relation to each other. In explaining this, Wellmer invokes the distinction between "discursive" and "non-discursive" knowledge: "both desire knowledge; in its entirety but the very fact of knowledge being split into non-discursive and discursive knowledge means that they can each only grasp complimentary fragmented forms of truth". So that

> In the work of art truth makes it's appearance as an object of the senses; this accounts for its superiority over discursive knowledge. But precisely *because* truth appears by means of the senses in the work of art, truth remains inaccessible to aesthetic experience; since the work of art cannot express the truth which it makes manifest, aesthetic experience does not know what it experiences.[34]

Wellmer continues to expound what this dilemma implies for Adorno.

> Should one try to grasp what cannot be grasped through an interpretative penetration of the work of art, then it disappears like a rainbow to which one has come too close (*AT.* p178). However, if the truth content of works of art were locked into the moment of aesthetic experience, it would be lost and the aesthetic experience would itself be in vain. For this reason, works of art are dependent on "interpretative reason" (*AT.* p.186) on the production of their truth content through interpretation, which points beyond the fleeting moment of aesthetic experience. For Adorno, interpretation means *philosophical* interpretation; the need for interpretation which is inherent in the work of art is the need which aesthetic experience has for illumination. "Genuine aesthetic experience must become philosophy or it fails to exist at all." (*AT.* p.190) Philosophy , however, whose utopia it is "to open up the non-conceptual by means of concepts, without making it equivalent to these concepts." (*ND.* p.10) remains tied to the medium of conceptual language, in which the immediacy of truth as it appears in the aesthetic experience cannot be restored.[35]

Now, in an important sense, Wellmer diagnoses here is the familiar contradiction latent in all philosophical aesthetics - that what it sets out to do is literally impossible. The distinction between the means of philosophical aesthetics as discursive thought and its object, non-

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[34] Albrecht Wellmer, 'Truth, Semblance, Reconciliation: Adorno's Aesthetic Redemption of Modernity', p. 92-93.

[35] Albrecht Wellmer, 'Truth, Semblance, Reconciliation: Adorno's Aesthetic Redemption of Modernity', p. 93.

discursive thought, are incompatible. The impossibility of aesthetics is an overt theme in *Aesthetic Theory* and is related to Adorno's pessimism. At the same time, Wellmer highlights the fact that in Adorno's thought this incompatibility is not just a *problem* for philosophical aesthetics, it is constitutive of philosophical aesthetics. As such, it is not just a contradiction that needs to be overcome. Its implications need to be explored and explained. Art and philosophy both have differently configured rational and mimetic aspects, neither of which can properly grasp the truth. There is the implication that together, as reunited fragments, they might be more truthful than in their isolation. The arena where they are brought together is philosophical aesthetics. In this sense, philosophical aesthetics is not simply a somewhat idiosyncratic branch of philosophy, dedicated to the analysis of art and aesthetic experience. Rather, it is where discursive and nondiscursive thought are held together. Discursive thought *qua* mind tries to represent art *qua* being. Discursive thought *qua* being attempts to be mimetic of art in the rational critique of its own concepts. Thus characterized, Rüdiger Bubner has emphasized the defining importance of aesthetics for Adorno:

> The pessimism vis-à-vis any historical progress of rationality combined with a Marxist distrust of all pure theory worked together to make philosophy as a whole appear unreliable. Adorno's way out of radical skepticism is aesthetics. Theory of art is not only one philosophical discipline among others, it tends increasingly to coincide with philosophy. That theory which cannot simply "state" *the* truth, because its understanding is absorbed in aesthetic experience, offers the best chance *to* truth.[36]

This characterization of the strategic significance of aesthetics as the exemplary site for the bringing together mind and being relates to Lukács' configuration of his relation to the proletariat. For Lukács, it was the job of philosophical reflection *qua* mind to represent the reification of experience to the proletariat. The proletariat alone had the power to transform the reification of consciousness at the site of its production. At the same time, the proletariat

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[36] Rüdiger Bubner, "Hegel's Aesthetics - Yesterday and Today", in Steinkraus & Schmitz, (eds.), *Art and Philosophy in Hegel's Philosophy*, (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1980), pp. 26-27.

did not understand either their revolutionary significance, or their own potentially non-reified consciousness. Ironically, it is Lukács' romanticization of the proletariat as potentially pure being that does not allow him to consider his own being, and hence the mind of the proletariat. The ubiquity of reification in Adorno is a function of his configuration of the inseparability of mind and being at this level, which in turn has a causal relation to the significance he gives aesthetics. Of course, Adorno and Lukács were perpetually disagreeing on this constellation of mutually sustaining assumptions in each others' thought. It is behind Lukács' attack on Adorno in the 1962 preface of *The Theory of the Novel*:

> A considerable part of the leading German intelligentsia, including Adorno, have taken up residence in the 'Grand Hotel Abyss' which I described in connection with my critique of Schopenhauer as 'a beautiful hotel equipped with every comfort, on the edge of an abyss, of nothingness, of absurdity. And the daily contemplation of the abyss between excellent meals and artistic entertainments, can only heighten the enjoyment offered.[37]

The earlier critique of Schopenhauer to which Lukács is re-invoking, appears in his book *The Destruction of Reason* (1962). The sophistication of Lukács' insult is not just what it says about Adorno, but that in re-using the same insult against Adorno, Lukács is likening Adorno to the original anti-Hegelian. He is thereby alluding to the fact that their disagreement is ultimately about who is the better reader and developer of Hegel. Adorno described *The Destruction of Reason* as actually signaling the destruction of Lukács' own reason.

Adorno's emphasis on the strategic significance of aesthetics as the mutual dependence of art and philosophy contrasts with Heidegger's account of their relation. Paul Crowther has argued that, for Heidegger, the rise of aesthetics is a symptom of the decline of great art:

> He [Heidegger] asserts that at the period of the Greeks' great art, their 'luminous state of knowing' meant that they had 'no need' of an aesthetics. Aesthetics, indeed, begins only when Greek art 'goes into decline.' Why does it go into decline? Heidegger does not answer this question explicitly but the

[37] Georg Lukács,*The Theory of the Novel: A historico-philosophical essay on the forms of great epic literature*, trans. A. Bostock, (London: Merlin, 1978), p. 11.

> direction of his thinking is manifestly clear. Greek culture (certainly at the time of the pre-Socratics) dwelt in a close and authentic proximity to Being, and brought it to an unconcealment in an appropriate way. However, the rise of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy introduced more dissembled modes of thinking which came to pervade other aspects of culture and to turn them away from the authentic unconcealment of Being. Art, therefore, now comes to be understood fundamentally as a means to the production of feeling, i.e., in terms of its effect on the human subject. Again, in the Modern period, we find that the rise of the aesthetic attitude once more coincides with the decline of great art. Under the impact of Cartesian philosophy, man continues his dissembling of Being and understands himself fundamentally from the viewpoint of his own subjectivity. Art accordingly re-orientates itself towards the more personal dimension of expression and feeling. It is this tendency which the aesthetic attitude attempts to legitimise.[38]

This is extremely useful for teasing out some of the differences between Heidegger and Adorno as they have been described thus far, in terms of their ramifications for aesthetics. Heidegger makes a distinction between the "great art" of the pre-Socratic Greeks and art of the modern period, which needs aesthetics. This move, for Heidegger, is a decline. Adorno makes the same distinction, though it is not as much between the art of the Greeks and the Modern as between the Modern and everything else. At the same time, Adorno reverses Heidegger's prognosis of decline while accepting the basis of Heidegger's distinction between Greek art and Modern art. Thus, it is precisely when it is thought that art can be experienced without resort to philosophical unpacking by aesthetics that it is irrelevant. This is a function of both the art object and of the determination of experience in history. Thus pre-Modern art can appear unproblematic because it does not manifest the tensions within it, and reification simplifies the experience of art to the extent that its truth value is understood as equivalent to its physical existence. In other words, under the present reification of consciousness, the only art which has potential value is that art which is not susceptible to the kind of "luminous knowing" Heidegger ascribes to the Greeks. On the

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[38] Paul Crowther,"Heidegger and the Question of Aesthetics," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 19 (January 1988), p. 53.

contrary, it is the very resistance of some modern art works to such assimilation which creates one half of the necessity for the mutual dependence of art and philosophy.

One of the oddest things about the reception of Adorno's aesthetics is that his rejection of pre-modern art as a whole has gone almost completely uncommented on. Instead his hostility to "mass culture" has been explained as a symptom of his cultural conservatism. There is certainly an aspect of Adorno which is conservative. In the light of his wholesale rejection of pre-Modern art manifest in explicit discussions of its current irrelevance and in statements such as "One reason why the well educated close themselves off from radically modern art is their angry displeasure at having to witness the decomposition of traditional artistic values brought on by the murderous historical force of modernity",[39] however, his cultural conservatism, if it is that, needs to be rethought.

Adorno's critique of Hegel or Philosophical Mimesis as "delay"

If Wellmer has diagnosed the mutual dependence of aesthetics and art, he does not explain the form it takes. In the first part of this chapter, philosophical mimesis was considered as the "movement of the concept" qua the movement of aesthetics towards art. The movement, thus described, represents the capacity of philosophy to do something about the inadequacy of its conceptual medium. The other side of the coin is that philosophy, despite its best efforts to move towards art, cannot finally do so. Thus, as Wellmer writes,

> Philosophy , however, whose utopia it is "to open up the non-conceptual by means of concepts, without making it equivalent to these concepts." (*Negative Dialectics*. p.10) remains tied to the medium of conceptual language, in which the immediacy of truth as it appears in the aesthetic experience cannot be restored.[40]

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[39] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 50.
[40] Albrecht Wellmer, 'Truth, Semblance, Reconciliation: Adorno's Aesthetic Redemption of Modernity', p. 93.

This means that the "movement of the concept" cannot be construed as a simple movement towards its object. It is, to return to something like what is implied by Gadamer's equivocation, also about maintaining a distance between philosophy and its object. The best way to explain the dilemma Adorno faces here is to reconsider his position relative to Hegel's teleology.

As we saw in Marx' critique of Hegel, Marx emphasises Hegel's greatest contribution to philosophy as his systematic development of the idea of truth as process - "historical becoming". As I have already suggested, Adorno's equivocal relationship with Hegel's thought is a reflection of the central importance of the idea to his own philosophy, combined with a rejection of that element of Hegel's Idealism which emphasises the possibility of attaining Absolute Knowledge. Adorno's ambivalence towards Hegel on this issues is by no means without precedent. Both within Hegel's own thought, and in its subsequent interpretation and development by others, an obvious tension exists between the Idealist aspiration for Absolute Knowledge and the emphasis on truth as inseparable from "historical becoming" and its consequent dynamism. Take the following quotation from the Preface to Hegel's *Phenomenology*:

> the real issue is not exhausted by stating it as an aim, but by carrying it out, nor is the result the actual whole, but rather the result together with the process through which it came about. The aim itself is a lifeless universal, just as the guiding tendency is a mere drive that as yet lacks an actual existence; and the bare result is a corpse which has left the guiding tendency behind it.[41]

This putative unity of "process" and "result" is notoriously awkward to grasp. As we have seen, one cannot simply be adopted without the other. We cannot simply reject Hegel's claim for Absolute Knowledge. He can reply that we are criticising his claim for the unity of "process" and "result" in isolation from the essential activity of dialectical argument, which

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[41] G.W.F.Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans A.V.Miller, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 2.

arrives at such a conclusion. Hegel's dialectical argument is itself based on the form of contradiction. According to him, it is only so far as contradictions are perceived to exist, and we are able to identify them, that experience is possible. We develop more sophisticated understandings of our place in the world through establishing contradictions in our conception of the status quo, resolving them, but in the process establishing new contradictions. For Hegel "contradiction is the root of all movement and vitality; it is only in so far as something has a contradiction within it that it moves, has an urge and activity."[42]

The strength of Hegel's argument lies in the idea that it is not only philosophy which deals in contradictions and their resolution, but experience has the same basis. Hegel can claim, therefore, that in the process of his philosophical argument he is able to combine the action of the processes of thought with a criticism of it. Any contradiction we identify in Hegel's position is necessarily derived by principles he has already described, and can therefore be accounted for and resolved on Hegel's terms. Of this infuriating aspect of Hegel's thought Adorno writes "Like other closed systems of thought, Hegel's philosophy avails itself of the dubious advantage of not having to allow any criticism whatsoever."[43]

Hegel himself, however, sometimes gives the impression of having been unable to resolve the contradiction between "Process" and "Result" - most notoriously in what some have seen as the notion that the process of history ends with the process of his thought in the Prussian State of 1827. There are cogent reasons for dismissing this simple view of Hegel's failure, the most obvious is that the Prussian State of 1827 should not be read as a frozen moment in history, but as "the present" in the sense that it was Hegel's "present", and is hence thoroughly dynamic.[44]

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[42] G.W.F.Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans A.V. Miller, (New York: George Allen & Unwin, 1969), p. 439.
[43] T.W. Adorno, 'Aspects of Hegel's Philosophy' in *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 1993), p. 2.
[44] In defending Hegel against one of his lesser disciples, Lukács in notes the awkward tension between the dynamism of Hegel's philosophical method and its conclusion:

Nonetheless, where there is tension between "process" and "result" within his work, the history of the reception of Hegel has tended to reproduce it. Hegelians have split on the issue of whether he achieved Absolute Knowledge, or whether his position implies truth can only be possible as the product of "historical becoming". In other words, the tension between "process" and "result", which Hegel announces as both necessary *and* overcome in his philosophy, is not resolved simply at the level of reading. If this were the case, the sympathetic commentator will find Hegel to have overcome the contradiction, and the unsympathetic will see it as unresolved. On the contrary, sympathetic readings of Hegel divide on this question.

To summarise, therefore, we can say that there appear to be two kinds of contradiction between "process" and "result" in Hegel. There is one which is emphasised as necessary for the possibility of thought, and one which emerges out of a genuine uncertainty as to the nature of his achievement and his own understanding of it.

Adorno's critique of Hegel rests on discriminating between these two categories of contradiction. For Adorno, the distinction surfaces most obviously at moments of crisis in Hegel's philosophy where one of the contradiction between "process" and "result" threatens to exclude the other. For example, Hegel notoriously has real problems both in beginning and ending his argument. The Preface to *The Phenomenology* begins with an apology that it should be necessary at all

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> ...in stopping at the present, at what he calls the self-attainment of the spirit, Hegel's system is reactionary both in substance and in its intentions and consequences. Looked at from the methodological standpoint, however, refusal to go any further reveals Hegel's magnificent realism, his rejection of all utopias, his concern to conceive philosophy *as the conceptual expression of history itself* and not as philosophy about history... only in consequence of his reactionary *hypostatizing* of the present did it change from a dynamic principle impelling reality forwards into a static one designed to fix the stage presently attained as an absolute.

see Georg Lukács, 'Moses Hess and the Problems of Idealist Dialectics,' in Rodney Livingstone, (ed.), *Georg Lukács: Political Writings 1919-1929. The Question of Parlimentarianism and Other Essays*, (London: New Left Books, 1968), p. 188.

> It is customary to preface a work with an explanation of the author's aim... In the case of a philosophical work, however, such an explanation seems not only superfluous but, in view of the nature of the subject-matter, even inappropriate and misleading.[45]

Hegel has similar difficulty in trying to bring his philosophy to a conclusion, to reconcile the "movement through contradiction" which defines his argument and with its "End" in the form of Absolute Knowledge. Adorno complains of Hegel's dilemma, "if something is conceived to be possible only as an emergent phenomenon, it makes little sense to claim simultaneously that it is integral and 'complete'."[46] And, more specifically, in *Negative Dialectics* he writes of Hegel's position,

> There is contradiction as well as kinship between this concept of the system - a concept that concludes, and thus brings to a standstill - and the concept of dynamism, of pure, autarkic, subjective generation, which constitutes all philosophical systematics. Hegel could adjust the tension between statics and dynamics only by construing his unitarian principle, the spirit as a simultaneous being-for-itself and pure becoming...the implausibility of this construction - in which subjective generation and ontology, nominalism and realism, are syncopated at the archimedean point - will prevent the resolution of that tension is also immanent in the system.[47]

The main co-ordinates of Adorno's relation to Hegel's philosophy, then, are part of a long tradition of ambivalence towards Hegel's philosophical legacy. In the quotation above, however, Adorno signals a refining of the basic contradiction between "process" and "result" as has been described thus far. The issue here is not of "which Hegel" to follow, as is reflected in the split between the Young and Old Hegelians. Rather, Adorno emphasises contradiction at a different level - the issue concerns precisely the kind of "process" Hegel's philosophy implies.

As it was with Derrida, the focus of Adorno's attention here is Hegel's idea of "the system". The problem, he suggests, is that if "process" or "historical becoming" is always

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[45] G.W.F.Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p.1.
[46] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 39.
[47] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 25.

conceived of as taking place systematically, it is a fundamentally different kind of "process" from that which takes place without such a framework. Moreover, for Adorno, the difference is highly significant in terms of diagnosing what, for him, is wrong with Hegel's philosophy. Despite Hegel's emphasis on the notion of "truth as historical becoming", its necessary containment within the framework of Idealist aspirations always predetermines the way a particular question is answered. This prevents Hegel from fully realising the ambition of allowing objects to "speak" on their own terms, without the imposition of extraneous categories of judgement. For Hegel, the aspiration had been, as Adorno says "freedom toward the object". Hegel aspired to describe the world as it is in itself, without imposing on it any subjective bias. By conceiving of experience as systematic, however, Hegel's version of "historical becoming" is modified through its orientation to an *end*, namely, the idea that the world is finally meaningful. To put this slightly differently, the potential "freedom towards the object", signalled by the idea of truth as "historical becoming", is in fact already "unfree" since it is defined by Hegel's aspiration for the "Truth" which "Stands". As Adorno writes in *Negative Dialectics*,

> The philosophical call for immersion in detail, a demand not to be steered by any philosophy from above or by any intentions infiltrated into it, was Hegel's one side already. Only in his case the execution caught in tautology: as by prearrangement, his kind of immersion in detail brings forth that spirit which from the outset was posited as total and absolute.[48]

Seen in the light of this criticism of Hegel, Adorno's rejection of the idea of an "End" for philosophy might be conceived of as having removed the aspect of predetermination in the putative freedom of Hegel's idea of truth as "historical becoming". In place of Hegel's "End" for philosophy, Adorno adopts the principle of "Infinity."[49] The task of philosophy is never-ending, because reason is never sufficient to describe its object fully. The negative

[48] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 303.
[49] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 62.

capacity of reason operates in philosophy so that, ideally, any claim philosophy makes contains within it an intimation of its own inadequacy. As Adorno puts it, "Disenchantment of the concept is the antidote of philosophy."[50] In other words, philosophy's persistent investigation and inquiry into the validity of its own achievements gives it a uniquely critical awareness of the inadequacy of claims to have grasped Absolute knowledge.

Adorno often seems to contradict himself when describing Hegel. Moreover, such contradiction is not simply defined by his advocacy of the idea of "historical becoming", and rejection of "the System". On the contrary, where Hegel is discussed in terms of "historical becoming" the insidious influence of "the System" is played down.[51] Where Adorno discusses Hegel in *Negative Dialectics* and the predominant motif is "the System", he is correspondingly far more hostile to Hegel, and the idea of "historical becoming" receives scant attention.

Despite the potential for confusion, a concrete manifestation of the different priority Hegel and Adorno allow the principle of "historical becoming" is in their contrasting deployment of introductory and concluding remarks. Hegel makes extravagant claims to Absolute Knowledge, even if that condition is itself conceived of as dynamic. Where he is at pains to emphasise that the real issue is "the result together with the process through which it came about", Hegel seems to invite confusion. Adorno for one, is unconvinced by such putative unity, speaking of the "implausibility of this construction". Similarly, although Hegel apologises for the presence of a Preface at the beginning of the *Phenomenology*, he still writes one. In contrast to Hegel, Adorno is notoriously evasive as to the question of beginnings, results or conclusions to his project - fact which exposed him to a great deal of criticism from more orthodox, utopian Marxists, especially Lukács. His resistance to

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[50] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 13.
[51] See for example, the essay "The Experiental Content of Hegel's Philosophy" in *Hegel: Three Studies*.

teleological thought is similarly a major factor in his dispute with Benjamin. It is also a focus for more recent criticism of Adorno's position. Jay complains,

> *Negative Dialectics* ends with a weak plea for an uneasy alliance between nonabsolutist metaphysics and the negation of identity. The ghost of the Kantian Antinomies remained unexorcised.[52]

Just as Adorno's problem with the "Idea" of a beginning for philosophical thought is reflected in the difficulty he has in engaging with traditional philosophical argument, so his refusal to countenance the idea of an "End" to philosophy leaves him open to the criticism that he does not bring his arguments to satisfactory conclusions. On the few occasions where Adorno addresses the idea of an "End", it is always self-consciously paradoxical, as for example in *Negative Dialectics* where he remarks,

> What makes philosophy risk the strain of its own infinity is the unwarranted expectation that each individual and particular puzzle it solves will be like Leibniz's monad, the ever-illusive entirety in itself - although, of course, in line with a pre-established disharmony rather than a pre-established harmony.[53]

In Hegel, ambiguity as to his own aspirations creates a contradiction between the claim for simultaneous "process" and "result". Adorno on the other hand takes a far less equivocal attitude to the problem. Whilst, indeed, he almost admits an aspiration to "entirety", and therefore to conclusion, such "entirety" is characterised as both "ever-illusory" and (in obvious opposition to Hegel) as a "pre-established disharmony".

We can say then that Adorno modifies Hegel's idea of "truth as historical becoming" by removing the possibility of its "End". This, in turn, changes the way dialectical thought engages with detail. Instead of predetermining particular phenomena as amenable to exhaustive description, he predetermines as partially knowable. This incomplete knowledge, comprehended as such, does not however represent failure for philosophy. Rather, it

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[52] Martin Jay, 'The Concept of totality in Lukács and Adorno' in S.Avineri (ed.), *Varieties of Marxism*, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977), p. 163.
[53] *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 13-14.

replicates the "non-identical" world as it really is in itself. This is the other dimension of philosophical mimesis in *Aesthetic Theory*.

Adorno's invocation of Hegel's idea of the "movement of the concept" is most significant, not least because it reintroduces into our argument Gadamer's idea of the truth of philosophy as deriving from its character as discursive thought. In so doing, it begins to resolve the tension inherent in the idea of philosophical mimesis as "self-conquest of the concept", because that self-conquest can also be understood as processural, rather than somehow isolated in a single truth claim.

Like Hegel, Adorno understands his project to be historically confined. At the same time, he allows for accumulation in the increasingly adequate experience of artworks. Indeed, he exemplifies it in *Aesthetic Theory*, but this is not a teleological process, as it is in Hegel. This does not mean he abandons reason; his deployment of reason is different from Hegel's because it is always struggling against its definitive insufficiency, hence the idea of the concept striving to get beyond the concept. In Hegel, because of the idea of sublation, what was said before is out dated by what is said after. In Adorno this "outdating" cannot take place in the same way because he is not a teleological thinker. In Hegel, the mimetic impulse of his philosophy, the "*movement* of the concept", is guaranteed because there is always going to be a rational explanation for the failure of a particular rational representation. The same goes for Adorno. He remains completely committed to the critical power of rational thought, but Adorno is not a teleological thinker. Or is he? In *Aesthetic Theory*, a concept is not necessarily preceded by a less perfect version. Rather different concepts are constantly up against each other. Definitions are incomplete and sometimes appear unsustainable. Hegel's methodical procedure is not simply inverted into complete anarchy in *Aesthetic Theory*.

> It might be objected that this position reflects a vestige of dogmatic confidence in the Hegelian system, that a notion like 'movement of the concept' has no validity outside that system, and that to grasp a thing as the life of the concept presupposes the coincidence of objective totality with spirit. This is not so. My argument is that... ...the general characteristics of art are more than just responses to the need for conceptual reflection: they also testify to the principle that the need for individuation has its limits and that neither it nor its opposite should be ontologized.[54]

The opening pages of *Aesthetic Theory* are difficult, not just because of the controversial nature of some of its claims, but because Adorno presents them in a dogmatic, even polemical manner. Without seeking to excuse Adorno for this tendency, his apparent dogmatism is a function of his critical method. Recall that in the Draft Introduction Adorno identifies different, but connected, motivations for his argument. These include the inadequacies of traditional aesthetics, the move towards nominalism in contemporary aesthetics, and changes in art. As I argued at the end of Chapter 1, any claim Adorno makes will be justifiable with reference to one or more of the mediating ideas that motivate his thinking. More important, all these mediations have to work simultaneously in driving the arguments of *Aesthetic Theory*. It is because Adorno is so acutely aware of the dangers of allowing his argument to become over-determined by a single perspective that truth claims will not necessarily generate justification or explanation in the immediate context of their articulation. Rather, the implications of a truth claim for a related argument will be compensated for, sometimes a few lines later, sometimes pages later, sometimes in a completely different part of *Aesthetic Theory*. This compensation expresses itself in the way aesthetics modifies itself in response to a particular idea of art, but also with regard to the other mediating ideas which define *Aesthetic Theory*: the idea of reification, the tradition of philosophical aesthetics, Hegel's aspiration for philosophy, etc. The justification for the claims he makes only begins to emerge as an indirect interaction between claims about art

[54] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 259.

and claims about the practice of aesthetics, reification, and so on. These are claims which, in the process of reading, gradually emerge as mutually supportive by the implications they carry for each other.

In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno explains what he is trying to do by using this method of "argument", and why he does it. He emphasises coherent aims, despite their opaque articulation,

> The unifying moment survives...because there is no step-by-step progression from the concepts to a more general cover concept. Instead, the concepts enter into a constellation...The model for this is the conduct of language. Language offers no system of signs for cognitive functions. Where it appears essentially as a language, where it becomes a form of representation it will not define its concepts. It lends objectivity to them by the relation into which it puts the concepts...[55]

This notion of *Aesthetic Theory* as an accumulation of different arguments, rather than a single developing argument, is central to its definition. It also explains more clearly how we might think of its speculative structure as a function of the stringent deployment of philosophical judgement. This is obviously not the linear progress of traditional philosophical argument, but a constant breaking off of that argument. Concepts are left undefined in the immediate context of their articulation. Asides are made; the word "incidentally" appears frequently; diversions are entered into. These are all expressions of the terminal inadequacy of the philosophical concept in an abstract sense. At the same time, they are also a filling in of the gaps left by concepts. These nonconceptual gaps are the implications for the representation of art of reification, history, and the peculiarities of a particular work itself.

Another aspect of this tendency to stray from the point is reflected in the assertion that "It is through its dynamic laws, not through some invariable principle, that art can be understood. It is defined by its relation to what is different from art."[56] An enormous amount

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[55] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 162.
[56] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 4.

of space in *Aesthetic Theory* is devoted to explaining what art is not. One of the things art is not is philosophy, and it is clear that the discursive quality of philosophy, as it contrasts with and compliments the immediacy of the art work, is central to its truth value. Thus, "Pure immediacy is not enough to generate aesthetic perception. Besides spontaneity, will and mental concentration are needed as well - a contradiction that cannot be liquidated by decree."[57] Philosophical reflection takes time, the "movement of the concept" takes time, and it is the temporal assimilation of itself to a work of art which is a necessary definition of *Aesthetic Theory.*

Identifying this idea of various diversions from "the point" as an explicit strategy of *Aesthetic Theory* is a problem. I have argued that it is a function of the stringent deployment of philosophical argument. At the same time, ideas of what philosophy is and the conventions of philosophical reading, are just not equipped to read it that way. Straying from 'the point' is *de facto* bad philosophy. It is with the idea that such a philosophical response to reading *Aesthetic Theory* will not pay attention to the various potential levels and significances of digression in *Aesthetic Theory* that a very limited recourse to a related insight from literary criticism can be usefully deployed. This is not to saying *Aesthetic Theory* is literary, but in its resistance to teleology, it relates to various anti-narrative devices in literature.

Patricia Parker has discussed at length the structure and significance of the rhetorical trope of *dialtio* or *amplificatio* in Renaissance literature. It is her discussion of this trope which is relevant to understanding the structure of *Aesthetic Theory*, with one important proviso. Parker notes that, as a rhetorical device, *dilatio* is something which would have been learned and consciously deployed to create a desired effect.[58] I am not claiming that Adorno

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[57] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 103.

[58] Parker writes "the rhetorical technique of *dialtio* or *amplificatio* which Shakespeare and other renaissance schoolboys would have had drummed into them from the various rhetorical handbooks of the day." P. Parker, "Deferral, Dilation, Différence: Shakespeare, Cervantes, Johnson." in Parker and Quint (eds) *Literary Theory/Renaissance Texts*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

did anything like this. On the contrary, it is precisely the problem of writing philosophically about art in the way he does that spontaneously generates effects which the conscious literary deployment of *dilatio* seeks to achieve directly. Parker explains that

> "To dilate," in Renaissance English, meant not only to expand, disperse or spread abroad but also to put off, postpone, prolong, or play for time - meanings which still linger in the modern English "dilatory". It is this combination of temporal deferral and spatial tension which informs its significance in several different contexts. The specifically rhetorical meaning of "dilate" - the amplifying and prolonging of discourse - involves both an expansion and an opening up, the creation of more copious speech through explication, or unfolding, of a brief or closed, hermetic "sentence", widening the space between its beginning and ending and generating much out of little, many words (or things) where there had been few.[59]

Now, there are various ways this discussion can be seen to be directly related to what happens in *Aesthetic Theory*. I have already suggested that one such is the postponement or prolonging of the deployment of the philosophical concept in the face of its acknowledged inadequacy. Equally, since the meaning of every concept posited in *Aesthetic Theory* is mediated, its meaning(s) shift and change within the work, and what it means from one perspective can be different from what it means from another. It is here that Parker's description of "rhetorical" dilation as the "explication, or unfolding of a brief or closed hermetic sentence" is particularly useful. Adorno is well known for his use of the aphoristic form through *Minima Moralia*. One way to read some of the chapters of *Aesthetic Theory* is to understand each as the partial unfolding of a hermetic sentence with which it begins. For example, Chapter 1 begins "Today it goes without saying that nothing goes without saying, much less without thinking",[60] Chapter 7 with "The experience of art is valid only when it is live."[61] Now, not all the chapters can be read this way, because some are directly contiguous

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[59] Parker, P. "Dilation and Delay: Renaissance Matrices," *Poetics Today* 5 (1984) p. 520.
[60] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 1.
[61] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 252.

with the previous one. The means by which this unfolding takes place is again usefully delineated by Parker. In this case, Erasmus serves as an example.

> Erasmus describes the principal means of dilating a discourse - dividing a short sentence into its component parts through what was known classically as *divisio* and *partitio* (The first method of enriching what one has to say on any subject is to take something that can be expressed in brief and general terms, and expand it and separate it into its constituent parts"). The figure for this dilation through partition in Erasmus comes from the lexicon of natural or commercial abundance: "This is just like displaying some object for sale first of all through a lattice or inside a wrapping, and then unwrapping and opening it out and displaying it more fully to the gaze."[62]

This is a very useful definition of what happens at various moments in *Aesthetic Theory*. The direct quotation form Erasmus at the end of the above quotation gives a whole new meaning to Adorno's well -known assertion that "No theory escapes the market place."[63] Not withstanding this irony, a suggestive but incomprehensible idea is frequently presented in *Aesthetic Theory* with polemical directness. Its implications are then developed in various ways which go so far, break off and are taken up in a new way. This in turn is again broken off, and started again from a different angle. This strategy can be related back to the notion of the inseparability of "mind" and "being" discussed earlier.

Adorno posits an opaque or, at least, indeterminate idea or concept. Mind, in its responsibility to deploy concepts in a stringent manner, begins to explain what that idea or concept means. This proceeds for a while, then Being takes over and reveals the one-sidedness of the forgoing discussion. This discussion then reorientates itself with regard to the original problem. This is philosophical stringency in its fullest sense. Stringency is deployed, both in the use of philosophical judgement in its representation of an object, and in the withdrawal of philosophical judgement in the light of a continued non-conceptual remainder. Now, in Hegel, this process moves forward and, as we have seen, is teleological.

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[62] Parker, P. "Dilation and Delay: Renaissance Matrices," p. 521.
[63] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 4.

In *Aesthetic Theory*, progress is possible to the extent that an argument is developed under the auspices of mind, but when this is disrupted by being, mind can only return to the original problem for a parallel development from a different perspective. Thus *Aesthetic Theory* is an argument which is constantly diagnosing and filling gaps, as is Hegel's *Phenomenology*. The difference is that these gaps in representation are always bridgeable for Hegel, while for Adorno they only are temporarily, in the instance when mind operates in isolation from being.

Earlier in this chapter, a variation of this strategy of argument was presented in Adorno's discussion of the various different reasons why traditional philosophical aesthetics had become obsolete. The "movement of the concept" implicit in Adorno's metacritique of aesthetics and the reorientation of his own aesthetics in relation to art is philosophical mimesis writ large in *Aesthetic Theory*. The same broad pattern repeats itself throughout *Aesthetic Theory* at different "magnifications." Chapters 1 and 2 of *Aesthetic Theory* are some of the most difficult to read, because of a range and variety of thoughts about art and the aesthetic are raised simultaneously. The remaining chapters can be thought of as developing some of the particular themes raised in Chapters 1 and 2. Each chapter "shows" and "says" a particular configuration of art and philosophy, concentrating on a particular aspect of their definition. Within this pattern, however, chapters 3 to 6 can be read as a particularly important progression. I will consider these chapters in their sequence. Before doing so, in the next chapter I will concentrate on a section of Chapter 10 of *Aesthetic Theory*.

Chapter V

AESTHETIC THEORY: CHAPTER 10

Adorno describes the chapters of *Aesthetic Theory* as a series of "partial complexes". Partial, because each is the discussion of an issue from the perspective of an aggregation of only a few of the possible mediating themes. In this sense, the chapters of *Aesthetic Theory* can be thought of as the breaking down of the constellation of arguments which constitute *Aesthetic Theory*, necessary from an organisational point of view. This is not to facilitate the development of a line of argument. The organisation of chapters, or arguments within chapters, is not necessarily linear so the order in which they are read is not specially important. Instead, the strategy of breaking down the work chapter by chapter enables Adorno to place some kind of limitation on the parameters of his discussion. The necessity for doing this is as an organisational antidote to the philosophical imperative to strive for the most adequate possible conceptual representation of the concrete particular. One of the things this generates is simple quantity of argument. Concepts need constant adjustment and reformulation. This takes in the different contexts of their deployment, but the contexts themselves are not definitively separable. Such complexity generates writing, and the demand of the material itself is to keep the moves of the argument as seamless as possible. The negative impact of arguing *Aesthetic Theory* into chapters is that everything Adorno says in a chapter needs to be taken on its own merits. It also needs to be thought of as a part of a more extensive argument, is thus incomplete. In chapter 10 of *Aesthetic Theory* the aspect of art that he concentrates on is its "artefactuality". In the section discussed below he moves from a consideration of the general significance of the artefactual quality of art, to the consideration of a particular object, in this case Picasso's use of light. While the narrowing of

focus from the general to the particular is being described, another movement takes place. Adorno is thus 'showing' what happens when philosophy attempts to describe the artefactuality of art and the inevitability of a remainder.

This chapter considers what Adorno means by his first statement, "The experience of art is adequate only when it is live." In beginning to unfold its meaning he reflects,

> This statement predicates something over and above a certain relationship between viewer and viewed, or that psychological cathexis is the condition of aesthetic perception. More fundamentally, asserts that aesthetic experience is live in terms of its object, namely at the moment when art works themselves are brought to life under the gaze of aesthetic experience.[1]

The suggestion of aesthetic experience as an act of "bringing to life" or resuscitation is relevant. Just as it is impossible to resuscitate a stone, so not every object has the potential to generate aesthetic experience. Equally, an unconscious person is different from a vegetable, but to realise that difference fully, the person actively needs to be brought back to life. So it is with the function of aesthetic experience, *qua* the process of revealing and engaging with the contradictory nature of art works. Equally, some art may be beyond resuscitation.

The metaphor of resuscitation breaks down, however, when Adorno seems to suggest that the enlivening of a work of art works both ways. He uses the word "live" when describing both the aesthetic experience and the work of art. That is, their potential liveliness is mutually dependent. Explaining the possibility of this mutual liveliness Adorno remarks, "The unity of meaning...is not static but processural. It is the enactment of antagonisms inherent in every work".[2]

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[1] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 254.
[2] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 252.

We can say that to have the potential to be resuscitated, i.e., experienced aesthetically, a work of art must "contain" antagonisms. The act of resuscitation is the "enactment" of those antagonisms and is *processural.*

Some of the questions Adorno is posing for himself now become clearer. He needs to explain how artworks "contain antagonisms" and why this is important. He has to explain what kind of experience "enacts the antagonisms" of art works, and why this is important. If, as he implies in the first sentence, art and the experience of it can take place in an inadequate way, he has to include an indication of how he distinguishes between art which is potentially "live" and art which is not. Lastly, having signalled the processural nature of the integration art and the experience of it, he has to explain what he means by this.

Chapter 10 is preoccupied with refining and redefining these ideas. A starting point can be taken as the following series of claims concentrating on defining the artwork, rather than the aesthetic experience. It is important to acknowledge that Adorno is breaking his own rules here. He has stated that the analysis of art is inadequate if it decomposes its object into basic units. Having emphasised the importance of grasping art and the experience of it simultaneously, to talk about the artwork in isolation is to break his own rules. The other side of this coin is that Adorno is committed to being critical in a rational sense. Art and rational analysis do not mesh together and, for the moment, Adorno is prepared to give rational argument the upper hand. With this in mind, we will take the following as a point of departure.

> The manner wherein art constitutes its existence is as a dynamic mode of behaviour, an orientation towards objectivity which does three things: it steps back from objectivity; it takes up a stance towards it; and in so doing preserves some version of it. Art works synthesise diverse, incompatible moments.[3]

[3] *Aesthetic Theory,* p. 253.

These claims can be taken as his definition of art and its significance in the most general terms. First, art can remove itself from objectivity. Second, this capacity for removal from objectivity is not simply a distancing, but a critique of that objectivity. Third, art is not completely distinct from the objectivity it criticises. These three themes can be summarised by saying that in relation to objectivity, art is simultaneously "autonomous", "critical", and "mediated". Adorno acknowledges these are "incompatible moments". They can only be understood in their simultaneity when art itself is understood as "a dynamic mode of behaviour".

Adorno gives some indication of what it might mean to understand this within the apparently restricted context of considering the behavioural dynamic of art *qua* "artefact".

> The dynamic quality of art works is grounded in the fact that they are man-made artefacts: as such they belong by definition to the 'native realm of the spirit', but in order to be identical with themselves they need the presence of the heterogeneous, the non-identical, the amorphous. The resistance of otherness in their midst prompts them to articulate themselves in the language of form, leaving absolutely no blank spots, no areas are not touched by form.[4]

Just because art works are a special subset of all man-made objects, this does not make their man-made quality less important to them as art than those characteristics which make them different from man-made objects. Adorno here is simply interested in man-made objects in general; what he says about them is extrapolated to art. He says that what defines man-made objects as such is their difference from "the heterogeneous, the non-identical, the amorphous". The man-made is differentiated from this state by virtue of having been "formed". I take Adorno to be using the word "form" here to imply any level of conceptual or physical synthesis of "the heterogeneous, the non-identical, the amorphous". He is not using "form" here to imply a special kind of "aesthetic" ordering. Having been thus formed,

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[4] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 253.

the man-made belongs to the "native realm of the spirit" which, in the broadest sense, is simply the opposite to "the heterogeneous, the non-identical, the amorphous".[5]

Having made this argument, Adorno then emphasises the obvious, namely that all man-made objects are the remains of the substance of that which is not man-made. This establishes a dialectical tension in all man-made objects: "Dynamic therefore is reciprocity, a restless antithetical process which *never* comes to a halt in static being. Works of art only ever exist *in actu*; their tensions never resolve themselves into pure identity with one or the other extreme."[6] Adorno is not simply stating that an artefact is, say, both wood and a chair. He is saying that a work of art *qua* artefact is form and matter. The tension of their simultaneous presence is a constituent of art *qua* art. In thus emphasising the artefactual in his argument, Adorno specifically aims to destabilise the idea of art as finally achieving "symbolic reconciliation" with the world. Such reconciliation, aesthetic or conceptual, is an impossibility. The significance of art, for Adorno, lies in its capacity to express the contradictions which the idea of "symbolic reconciliation" claims to resolve.

Having described the dual nature of man-made objects in general, Adorno now begins to differentiate within that class of object. He makes the general point that the simultaneous "form" and the "amorphous" qualities of the artefact create a dynamic tension: "Dynamic therefore is reciprocity, a restless antithetical process which never comes to a halt in static being. Works of art only exist *in actu*; their tensions never resolve themselves into pure identity with one or other extreme."[7] He then implies that this may be an ideal state, but it cannot be taken for granted as taking place in all artefacts, "they can act as a dynamic field

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[5] The temptation is to give a harder definition to this contrast using familiar oppositions such as 'culture' v. 'nature' or, 'human' v. 'non-human' but these are already loaded with the history of their usage that are extraneous to the matter at hand. For the moment it is better to contain the ambiguity implicit in the phrases "native realm of the spirit" and "the heterogeneous, the non-identical, the amorphous" and give these ideas more substance using Adorno's own argument.

[6] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 253.

[7] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 253.

of internal antagonisms only if and when they are finished, congealed objects".[8] "Finish" is the key word here. It is the conclusion of the process of differentiating the man-made object from the amorphous, rather than ideas associated with "finish" as a quality like "polish" or smoothness. This is important because "finish" is the state of being a "result". On this basis a finished man-made object expresses a more exaggerated contrast with the heterogeneous than an unfinished one, which would express the same tension in a less extreme way. In other words, the distinction between a finished and unfinished artefact is the *degree* to which they distance themselves from the heterogeneous. For example, we can imagine an unfinished novel where we are especially aware of the blank page beyond the place where the writing stops. This might seem to be a situation where the contrast between "form" and "mere existence" are thrown into the kind of stark contrast in which Adorno is interested. On the contrary, if an artefact is unfinished, "...the pent-up forces in them would simply run parallel to or away from each other without ever intersecting."[9]

The idea of 'conclusion' is certainly part of what is implicit in Adorno's emphasis on the significance of the finished work. Over and above this, the finished artefact also differs in *kind* from the unfinished in its relation to the heterogeneous. It is the tension between result *qua* finish and the heterogeneous *qua* process.[10] In other words, the dynamic processural tension of the finished artefact is constituted in the contrast between "form" and the "amorphous", and between "finish" *qua* arrested matter and the unformed changing matter of the heterogeneous.

It is especially the second sense of "finish" that we need to keep in mind when reading, "The paradoxical phenomenon of an equilibrium of forces negates itself. Their

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[8] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 253.
[9] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 253.
[10] This particular tension is made explicit later in chapter 10: "In terms of the concept of artefact, dialectics is a recurring relation between existing man-made products and their opposite, i.e. process." *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 265.

motion must come to a halt and yet remain visible *qua* motion in this standstill"[11]. In a literal sense, the finished artefact brings process to a halt, but it is that literal stasis which has the potential to animate the various dynamic tensions Adorno is interested in. It is the task of philosophical reflection on the work of art to unfold the halted motion of the tensions in the art work which appear to be at a standstill.

Having thus described the dialectic embodied in works of art *qua* finished man-made *object*, Adorno now goes on to explain what this characteristic of art implies for our *experience* of it. Or, to use the language employed above, he describes this characteristic of art in a way that makes the experience of it "live". Adorno sets out to answer what the understanding of the work of art *qua* artefact means, why this gives art value. Thus,

> the inherently processural nature of works of art, independent of any consideration of taking sides, comes out in the action they bring against what is external to them, i.e. mere existence. All works of art, including affirmative ones, are *ipso facto* polemical ones. The very notion of a conservative work or art is somehow absurd.[12]

First, against traditional aesthetics, he argues that it is the processural nature of art works that differentiates them from "mere existence". As objects, however, that process is at a standstill; it needs philosophical reflection to unfold it and bring forth its processural nature. We have seen Adorno argue that aesthetics since Kant has valued art because the art object "contains" an aesthetic essence which differentiates it from all other objects. Adorno says that, on the contrary, the value of the art work derives from the way it, like all artefacts, embodies the tensions. In this case, these tensions reside in its state of being man-made while being constituted of the matter of mere existence.

To give this premise a philosophical context, we can recall Kant's distinction between the determinant judgement and the aesthetic judgement. Determinant judgements involve the

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[11] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 253.
[12] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 253.

straight-forward labelling of a phenomenon by applying a concept to it. The aesthetic judgement, by contrast, involves the free play of the imagination and the understanding in representing a phenomenon to consciousness. Kant is making a firm distinction between two different kinds of judgement on the basis of their different internal structures. For Kant, it is in the way that it is distinct from the determinant judgement that the significance of the aesthetic judgement resides. Adorno, by contrast, is drawing attention to the act of synthesis itself, *qua* a distancing or separation from the manifold, irrespective of whether it is a determinant judgement aesthetic judgement. For Adorno, what seems to be significant, at this stage, is the degree to which this process of differentiation expresses itself as such. This is a function, both of the object's "finish" and its reception through philosophical unfolding.

Adorno now goes on to explain the value of this process of differentiation as it is expressed in art. He says that it makes all art works, *qua* artefacts, "*ipso facto* polemical": "By emphatically severing all ties with the empirical world, art in an unconscious way expresses its desire to change that world." To illustrate his argument, Adorno uses the example of Mozart's music. The choice of Mozart is deliberate because he is a "seemingly unpolemical artist...whom a conventional perspective would place squarely in the realm of pure spirit". That is to say, Mozart's work is traditionally thought of as being pure form in the sense that, unlike modern works, it draws very little attention to the material out of which it is constituted. Even so, Adorno argues,

> his music tacitly distances itself from the triviality and falsehood surrounding it. For Mozart the strength of form is determinate negation...The more resolute the act of distancing is, the more concrete will be the criticism of reality.[13]

It would be difficult to confuse Mozart with the artists of modernism, such as say, Schoenburg with whom *Aesthetic Theory* is more overtly preoccupied. Adorno's use of

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[13] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 254.

Mozart thereby serves to emphasise the global terms of his discussion at this stage. In other words, he is using Mozart to exemplify the general dynamic which gives art, *qua* artefact, its significance. Although Adorno uses Mozart to illustrate a general principle, in so doing, he produces a particularly tendentious reading of Mozart's broad significance. This is partly a function of the claim that all art, *qua* artefact, is polemical. Equally, his argument can be read as itself a demonstration of his premise that, to be live, the art object must have the latent capacity to have its contradictory nature expressed. Here Adorno is making explicit what he sees as the particularly heightened form of Mozart's music. He is suggesting, in a refinement of his discussion of the significance of "finish", that this heightened form serves to differentiate Mozart's music in a particularly extreme, and therefore critical, way from reality. At the end of the paragraph Adorno adds, "This may be an aspect of all serious varieties of classicism: they are interventionist rather than merely self-referential". In other words, having described "strength of form as determinate negation" in Mozart, Adorno is extending the same principle to classicism in the arts in general.

The idea that either Mozart, or classicism in general, are involved in "determinate negation" of anything sounds implausible, but we need to consider two things. First, this discussion is taking place within an account of the value of artefactuality in general. Second, Adorno's use of Mozart and classicism is exemplary of the kind of philosophical resuscitation necessary for the "live" experience of art. That this looks like a somewhat implausible account of the value of form in Mozart and classicism may imply that they are beyond critical resuscitation.

This reading of Adorno's use of Mozart is made more plausible where, for the first time in this chapter, Adorno begins to delineate what might constitute a "live" work of art. Thus far, Adorno has moved from a general discussion of the difference of art *qua* artefact

from its surroundings. Then, using the deliberately uncontroversial example of Mozart, he describes the significance of this difference. Having posited this general argument, he now begins to differentiate between art works in terms of the extent to which this tension can be, and is, made palpable. This is a move a move away from a critical animation of the *experience* of a work, vis. his argument about Mozart, to a claim about a category of *object* which might more explicitly reveal such contradiction beyond its "finish".

We will recall from the brief discussion of his difference from Kant, that art and the experience of it do not imply a different *kind* of experience from the experience of everyday reality. Rather, it is a question of the *degree* to which the contradictory nature of experience is made palpable in the process.

> When art works crackle, so to speak, it is because there is friction between the antagonistic moments they try to hold together. Their processural quality is encoded in objectifications like linguistic symbols or written language in general. In short, the processural nature of art is its temporal core.[14]

In the second sentence of this quotation he likens the processural quality of art to that of "written language in general". First, he speaks specifically of "written language". The word "apple" is a physical pattern of ink on a page, as well as being language. Later in the chapter he expands this observation: "Viewed from the outside, the written word and the written note are irksome to the eye because, paradoxically, they constitute an existent the meaning of which is in flux."[15] Adorno is committed to the idea of the instability meaning; indeed it is the instability of meaning which contrasts so forcibly with the relative stability of art work *qua* form. We have seen that an aspect of the value of art resides in the contradiction between its material stability, or finish, and the amorphous heterogeneity out of which it is made. Now, *additionally*, and this is a new argument, there is also value in the contradiction between its

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[14] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 254.
[15] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 263.

material stability and unstable meaning. It is worth noting that this contrast is quite alien to poststructuralist thought which emphasises the latter as a universal condition.

Having emphasised the importance of this new contradiction, Adorno continues to expand his argument, again emphasising that this tension can only be experienced through *time*. That is to say, it is only with the passage of time that we can experience the relatively unchanging physical object, in contrast to the changing meanings ascribed to it. Hence Adorno's assertion that "the processural nature of art is its temporal core". Adorno spends the next two pages in an extended discussion of this claim.

Before going on to consider this argument, it is worth briefly rehearsing what has been said so far and anticipating a problem. Adorno is talking about the value of art in general as being generated out of its contradictory state. He is very aware of the potential worthlessness of this claim because, as we have seen, contradiction needs to be experienced as such, rather than simply broken up for abstract analysis of its constituent parts. Thus far, the contradictions he has drawn out reside in the contrasts resulting from a consideration of the work of art as a man-made object. These contradictions are as follows: a) form v. the amorphous, b) finish v. the process of heterogeneity, and c) static object v changing meaning. At the risk of making an empty generalisation, despite their differences, all these contradictions are generated in particular construals of the opposition between stasis and the passage of time. Furthermore, Adorno has argued that art works can only be experienced as "live" if they are experienced as processural. It would seem that this assertion, encapsulated in the statement "the processural nature of art is its temporal core", implies the subordination of the work of art, *qua* object, to the experience of it. For example, we cannot grasp instantaneously how a work articulates itself in terms of the particular relation between form and the heterogeneous. The particular work may or may not make explicit this contradiction,

but it needs to be "unpacked" as such, and this literally takes time. This leads to the impression that the temporal "unfolding" of the work, in being experienced takes precedence over the concrete existence of the object. Given that Wellmer defines the discursive nature of philosophy in contrast to the non-discursive nature of art, it would seem that the experience of the work of art as "live" is its 'translation' from the non-discursive into the discursive. In Hegel, the imagination of art goes through a similar translation into the reason of philosophy. It is this translation of art to the terms of philosophy that constitutes the absorption of art into philosophy in Hegel. Is not Adorno doing the same thing?

Paradoxically, the object reasserts itself against the all-important temporal experience of it with Adorno's refinement of what he means by "temporality". He does this by introducing the ideas of the art work's "duration", and ultimately, "mortality". Two factors are important to bear in mind. First, Adorno is committed to distinguishing between the adequate, or "live" experience of art, and the inadequate experience of it. This clearly separates his project from traditional aesthetics which, as we have seen, tends to understand aesthetic experience as given. Second, he is equally committed to a similarly discriminatory attitude towards art works. That is, unlike traditional aesthetics, he does not take the sum total of art works as a group, for which he must derive normative characteristics. Rather, his project centres on discriminating between art works which are susceptible to being experienced as "live" and those which are not. Now, in this scenario, what limits the potentially infinite power of reception to resuscitate all artworks is its own historical situatedness and the "mortality" of art works. Art works, through time, loose their susceptibility to being experienced as "live". This is the moment where the power of the art work *qua* non discursive knowledge overrides the power of its successful unpacking by discursive knowledge.

Adorno's assertion of the "mortality" of art works definitively separates him from reception theorists. The defining characteristic of reception theory is the extent to which it sees the critical act as having primary responsibility for generating meaning, and not the work of art. The work of art is thus characterised as having potentially infinite meanings. In this sense, reception theory is different from traditional aesthetics because in shifting responsibility for meaning onto the critical act, it undermines the status of the art object. Like traditional aesthetics, however, theories of reception are non-discriminatory, even anti-discriminatory, in terms of their theorised capacity to make judgements about the relative value of different objects. This is to say that although traditional aesthetics and reception theory have radically opposing views about the significance of art, neither is much preoccupied with discriminating between 'good' and 'bad'. Both inevitably act in discriminating ways, but remain untheorized and unreflected upon. Reception theory fails because it places so little emphasis on the value of art as a category, while traditional aesthetics tends to be far more concerned with differentiating between art and non-art, or aesthetic experience and other types of experience, than with discriminating the good from the bad. Against both these traditions, Adorno's idea of the "mortality" of art works signals his overt concern with actively and consciously discriminating between categories of work, rather than with making claims for the global significance of all art. It also seems a function of his emphasis on the art object as having a determining impact on the possibility of its reception as "live"

At an abstract level, we already have a conception of Adorno's idea of what defines the mortality of an art work. A "live" art work is a work that is susceptible to having its contradictory nature made explicit in aesthetic experience. When a work looses this susceptibility, it reveals its mortality and dies. Within the framework of the argument so far,

however, the contradictions Adorno has concentrated on would seem to be universal to all artefacts. The two refinements he has signalled are the importance of "finish" and the "strength of form" of Mozart's music. Instead of developing additional specific physical refinements in his definition of the art work, Adorno now proceeds to discuss the art work in terms of its "duration"; literally, how long it lasts in a condition which is susceptible to live reception. This might seem an odd departure, but it is in tune with the original proposition that what constitutes the value of art resides neither wholly in the object nor in the experience of it. From the way he discusses "duration", it is clear that he is interested in how art objects configure the relation between themselves as objects and the passage of time, initially he is concerned with an example of a kind of art that has consciously aimed at duration, namely classicism. It is clear, however, that this kind of work serves as a counter-example to what he understands as duration, because when duration becomes "too intentional", as it does in classicism, then it actually shortens rather than prolongs the life of the work:

> if it exorcises what it deems ephemeral by resorting to pure impregnable forms or even such intangibles as universal human values, then it works against itself...Duration thus conceived falsely emulates conceptuality, which is a constant circumference or shell for diverse contents, aspiring to achieve something like static atemporality. All this is incompatible with the tensional properties of art works. This is why they perish more quickly, the more directly they aim at duration.[16]

The same quality, "strength of form", which in the earlier discussion of Mozart and classicism had taken on positive value, from the perspective of the idea of duration now appears in a negative light. This change in the value of "strength of form" is important to recognise. Until now, it has been described as an artefactual quality of art works, and as such, seemed both defining and *de facto* valuable. Now, from the different perspective of "duration" and the way "strength of form" is engaged by classicism, the same quality

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[16] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 254.

becomes a negative. As with reading Hegel, the process of reading Adorno's argument is an education in a way of thinking. When he says everything is "mediated", this is an example of that principle being practised in his own argument. "Strength of form", "classicism", "artefactuality" are all fluid concepts. None can be given definitive values and meanings. Their meaning and value only crystallise in specifically directed arguments. These arguments concentrate on particular qualities of a work, or group of works, in the light of a given perspective.

The problem with the "strength of form" of classicism, then, is that it consciously aims at duration as a kind of "static atemporality'. Using "pure impregnable forms" and appealing to "universal human values" this art engages in an overt attempt to evade the passage of time. The classical work is like the unfinished artefact, whose formed and material qualities do not intersect but run parallel. In its use of unchanging forms, it isolates these forms from temporality, instead of bringing the two together in contradiction, which is the basis for true duration. In Adorno's argument, classicism can be said to exemplify a kind of hyper-artefactuality. Its strength of form certainly differentiates it from mere existence, but only to the extent that it becomes apparently detached and simply parallels mere existence.

With this critique of classicism, Adorno moves his discussion of art beyond its quality *qua* artefact. It is something over and above form, *qua* difference from mere existence, that gives art works duration.

> Duration is implied by the concept of form but is not essential to it. Works that go out on a limb, seeming to rush headlong into perdition, have a better chance of surviving than the ones that bracket out temporality for the sake of security. It is the curse of classicism to keep generating a kind of art that is hollow and, because of that, falls victim to time.[17]

[17] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 254.

At this point, having used classicism to indicate what he does not mean by the duration of art, Adorno's relation to his own argument changes in a subtle way. He describes the "duration" of classicism as "too intentional", but when he starts to define what he might mean by "unintentional duration", his argument ceases to be a theoretical discussion using examples and begins to sound prescriptive. That is to say, it is by no means clear that the kind of art work he is describing actually exists. The quotation above gives some hint of this when he talks about art works "rushing headlong into perdition". There may be a number of different reasons for the change in the character of the argument.

The first reason is that *Aesthetic Theory* is becoming polemical in its demands for a new art. The second, reason is that aesthetics operates with concept but the nonconceptual work of art will never achieve what the concepts of aesthetics prescribe for it. Adorno is sanguine about discussing aspects of art in isolation, or failed art, but when he starts getting near the real thing, the medium in which he is working begins to break down. Thirdly, the kind of art Adorno is trying to define simply cannot exist, because its temporal limits are so severe. Its "duration" or "life" is literally the process of disappearing. The next paragraph begins with the implication that what he is talking about does not exist:

> What is at present conceivable, indeed necessary, are works that immolate themselves, through their temporal core, sacrificing their own lives, to the instant when their truth appears. For them perishing does not in the least diminish their importance. This new kind of nobility befits art in an age where nobility has degenerated into ideology. The idea of duration is patterned after property in bourgeois society; hence it is transient.[18]

Besides indicating the speculative nature of its claims, this section of argument does a number of things. It reasserts the importance of what is meant by the "temporal core" of art works. In so far as it deals with the problem of duration, it talks about an "instant". This is a temporal category, but seems the antithesis of duration. It appears that works of art are only

[18] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 254.

"live" in the process of revealing themselves; once they are revealed they perish. That is to say, although works of art *qua* objects must be made live through philosophical reflection, once they have been thus reflected on, their defining instantaneity is compromised and they die.

Having presented these controversial themes, Adorno puts them into a specific context, emphasising the idea of "duration" as not simply an aesthetic category, but as mediated by the idea of property. Aside from any theoretical argument, works of art are so thoroughly defined by their value as property that the idea they might only exist in a "live" state for an instant is very difficult to accept. At the same time, this idea of the art work as property is a function of bourgeois society, which Adorno considers to be transient. This last point serves as another condition for the apparent present impossibility of "live" art works.

With this refinement of what he means by duration, Adorno then apparently forestalls developing and explaining his argument for a while with a number of digressions. Before considering these digressions, and their function in his argument, it is worth briefly reiterating the salient points of his argument in order to reconstruct what he might mean by "unintentional duration".

Art which is "live" is in this state because of its "temporal core". The "temporal core" is its latent state of contradiction in the process of being made explicit by philosophical reflection. This process engages the idea of duration, both because it takes time and because it takes place at a particular historical moment. Finally, art works only exist as "live" in the process of being revealed, which is understood as an instant. Part of the problem here is that we seem to be dealing with the intersection of different categories of time between which Adorno has not differentiated. There is "critical time", which might be construed as the time it takes to experience an art work as live and there is what we might understand by the idea

of "historical time". In this sense, "critical time" could be construed as "instantaneous". All the same, "critical time" is not simply a fragment of "historical time", because the way they intersect changes. Thus, "The idea of duration is patterned after the concept of property in bourgeois society; hence it is transient".

Adorno now directly develops this last point, using two examples. First, he remarks, "There is many a period in art history and many an individual work that eschews duration".[19] He gives no concrete examples, but quotes two people who, in terms of the way he uses them, might have expressed ideas similar to what he means here

> Upon finishing the 'Apassionata', Beethoven is said to have expressed the belief that he felt confident that this sonata of his would still be played ten years later! Most intriguing in this connection is K.H. Stockhausen's idea that electronic works - to the extent that they are non-notational and directly realised in the material - might expire at the moment when they are played. Stochhausen's is a conception of art that retains the emphatic claim to being art while at the same time being ready to throw itself away.[20]

What is so odd about these examples is they seem to be the exact inversion of Adorno's use of classicism. The problem with classicism, we will recall, is that it attempted duration "too intentionally". Surely these examples are too intentional in their pursuit of "the instant". That is to say, part of the distance between Adorno's account of classicism's "intentional duration" and the preliminary indications of what constitutes proper "unintentional duration" in art, is the way the latter emerges as a complex and mediating series of relations between object and duration. The problem with classicism was that its duration was too static and atemporal in its internal dynamic. The same must surely be true of his Beethoven and Stockhausen examples; their "instantaniety" is apparently *qua* object, rather than the tensional dynamic of art and experience he has hitherto implied. The last

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[19] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 254.
[20] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 254-255.

sentence of the paragraph of his critique of classicism goes so far as to state, "Adding something ephemeral in the hope of achieving duration is no solution to the problem."[21]

As I have already indicated, one way to explain what Adorno is doing here is to understand these examples as specifically responding to his critique of the idea of property in bourgeois society, from which they immediately follow. The point is that Adorno has claimed bourgeois society places emphasis on defining art as property. Here are two suggestions of art works which might evade being property while remaining art. In isolation, this is rather a weak justification, and in the context of his critique of classicism a few lines above, does not really hold. At the same time, it is part of Adorno's argument as a means into a mode of thinking. The context where a theory might appear relevant changes, making a theory irrelevant. So while he might hold to his critique of classicism, works which aim at ephemerality as an effect are not necessarily outlawed, because they so obviously undermine the prevailing idea of art as property. If art were not so thoroughly identified as property as it is now, then Stockhausen's example might simply be trivial.

This suggestion is amplified by the first sentence of the next paragraph: "Like other traditional constituents of art, the temporal core has been turned outside, thus exploding the concept of art."[22] This indeed complicates the issue. Having emphasised the apparently constitutive significance of the "temporal core" of art, Adorno now seems to be contradicting himself. How can the "temporal core" be "turned outside"? Does he really mean that this implies abandoning his critique of the intentional duration of classicism to produce work which is "intentionally instantaneous"? There is plenty of scope for this argument. There are numerous contemporary examples of art works that deliberately seek to avoid physical permanence. In a different but related argument in chapter 5, Adorno says "The phenomenon

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[21] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 254.
[22] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 255.

of fireworks can be viewed as a *prototype of art* [my emphasis]".[23] Although it is clearly very important for him to take account of the idea of the material ephemerality of art works in his argument, he never endorses the idea whole sale in the sense that physical ephemerality does not necessarily constitute definitively "live" works.

If this is not what Adorno is getting at, then what is he saying? Instead of reading this part of Adorno's argument in a linear way, we need to consider some of the themes which are emerging simultaneously. We have understood something of the potential significance of "unintentional duration" in art and its difference from the model of classicism. Adorno has, in what seems like a diversion, emphasised that the classical idea of duration is itself defined by the bourgeois idea of property. Irrespective of the status of this hypothesis as a truth claim, it injects into Adorno's argument a different order of duration. That is to say, until this moment, Adorno has been defining in absolute terms the parameters which define a "live" art work. On the conditions of his own argument, such a theory is invalid because it is itself literally historically located. Instead of thinking of *Aesthetic Theory* in terms of the way it has been discussed so far in this chapter, let us consider it in the light of the following statement of the editors: "On 4 May 1961, Adorno began dictating a first version of *Aesthetic Theory* which consisted of relatively short paragraphs".[24]

If Adorno is to deal with the idea of "duration" properly, on his own terms, then he must consider it in all its significant mediations. What earlier looked like a deviation from the matter at hand, when he speaks of the idea of "duration as patterned after the concept of property in bourgeois society", actually represents a stage in the progressively narrowing focus of Adorno's definition of "duration". Equally, it is also a reorientation of Adorno's position towards his argument. Adorno characterises his own argument as subject to

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[23] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 19.
[24] "Editors Epilogue" to *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 294.

duration, and therefore as historical. Lastly there is a transformation of the form and parameters of the argument, but also of the problem itself, because what the idea of art's "duration" means changes through history. When Adorno says: "the temporal core has been turned outside", he is making a historical claim about "duration". This in an argument where it had ceased to be meaningful to discuss "duration" in abstract terms. This abstract approach worked for the critique of duration in classicism, but is not adequate to the conditions of art's duration at the present historical moment. What we could say about this, in conclusion, is that *Aesthetic Theory* is not a classical text. Its strength of form is not distinct from duration, but thoroughly mediated by it. I am not saying that *Aesthetic Theory* is an art work, but in terms of the rigorously conceptual and logical dynamic of its exploration of "duration" and art, its structure indicates something of what we should be looking for in art.

In beginning to elaborate on his critique of the idea of duration, Adorno discusses the impact of a particularly modern phenomenon on the idea of duration in art, namely fashion:

> The facile indictment of fashion as something transient and hence nurgatory is usually allied with the ideology of inwardness or interiority, which has long since been exposed as an inability to externalise something and as a narrow minded concern with the thussness of the individual. Fashion does more than just exploit works of art; it permeates them to their very core, far beyond all commercial manipulation.[25]

As with his detached relation to the earlier examples, Adorno's invocation of fashion here is tied quite specifically to the critique of its transience. This is another aspect of his attack on classicism, and here he ties that critique to associated ideas of universal subjectivity and what he calls "the ideology of inwardness". If the individual's subjectivity is conceived as an absolute, then fashion will necessarily be understood as external ephemera. The same principle can be extended directly to art. If what defines art *qua* art is presumed to reside in "pure impregnable forms" or "universal human values", then changes will either be construed

[25] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 255.

as erroneous departures from an absolute (classical) standard, or, as of secondary significance by comparison with normative characteristics of all works. Adorno's use of fashion here is not, however, restricted to its metaphorical suggestiveness in highlighting the importance of valuing art as transient. The impact of fashion is direct in a material sense, both because it exploits art for commercial ends and, more importantly, "permeates works of art to their very core". Part of this transformation occurs because "Fashion is one of the ways in which historical change affects the sensory apparatus, and thus, indirectly, works of art."[26] He precedes this claim with the following example.

> Inventions like Picasso's peculiar handling of light, in respect of their experimental quality, resemble fashion shows. They are like dresses sewn with a few stitches that hold the material together for a night. They can hardly be said to be properly crafted.[27]

Here he is beginning to come round to fuse his theoretical demand for art which "immolates" itself with a historical account of what has actually happened as a consequence of the impact of fashion on art. At the same time, it is important not to over-emphasise the significance of fashion in the argument. In the present context its significance is more exemplary than explanatory. It is an example of a new, and historically specific impact on the way we need to understand "duration," and how it is engaged by art. In concluding his discussion of fashion, Adorno says that its impact on art is slight; "Typically, its impact is small in degree and discernible only in recondite features of art."[28]

With this we can return to the problem of explaining what Adorno means by the various important claims that have been left hanging, namely, the "unintentional duration" of art and the claim that the "processural core" of art *has been* "turned outside". First, to try to derive "universal forms" and "universal experiences", either when making art or doing

[26] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 255.
[27] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 255.
[28] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 255.

aesthetics, is to attempt to separate art and the experience of it from their historical matrix. To locate the value of art or the experience of it in their ahistorical constituents is wrong, because it sets up static and atemporal contradictions as defining the production and reception of art. What has to be aimed at is "unintentional duration", where art and the experience directly engage each other through their own particular historical circumstances. This does not mean that they become definitively historical, nor does it mean they understand the specific constituents of their historical constitution; this would be impossible. Rather, their "processural core" is animated by actual contradictions, not abstractions. Lastly, this actual dynamic is located at the time of writing *Aesthetic Theory*, and this means (and here it is unclear whether Adorno thinks he is being descriptive or prescriptive) that art works have become definitively ephemeral in terms of the way they relate to their constitutive ideas. The "processural core" being "turned outside" means this, that it is no longer possible to talk about art by explaining the dynamic relation of certain categories such as "artefactuality" and "duration", because these themselves are changing. Newly significant categories emerge, such as "fashion", but more important, art's relation to all its traditionally stable categories along with the new ones, has become fundamentally unstable. This means that the process of art's contradictory dynamic is "outside" as well as "inside". So, to grasp the impact of fashion on art, we cannot deal with as a constant, like "artefactuality". Rather, the kind of impact fashion is variable and cannot be predicted. This has a knock on effect for the category of artefactuality, which, as a result, cannot be given an unequivocal function.

After concluding his discussion of fashion Adorno produces something of a summary of the wider implications his "position" as it has developed. The focus is now on understanding implications for the way we can now think of meaning and method in general, in the light of the fragmentation of his argument. These problems have become acute because

they arise directly out trying to describe art in terms of the parameters Adorno has established as defining it. We have seen that Adorno has emphasised the significance of understanding art in terms of its temporal core, and gone some way to describing what this means. He has demonstrated that this definition itself needs to be understood as subject to historical transformation. Art manifests its temporality differently in each of the examples he gives. Each example implies a different idea of the structure of the relation between art and duration. Classicism implies one kind of relation, Stockhausen's another, fashion another, Picasso's use of light another. In all the emphasis on specificity, is there any room for theory and method? Or has the dynamic of the problem absorbed the argument into a state of radical instability? The following passage can be construed as a kind of "standing back" on Adorno's part, to answer some of these questions. It therefore has a different function from what immediately precedes it.

> Above all, the work of art is processural in so far as it is a relation between a whole and its parts. In other words, this relation itself is a process of becoming. The work is not a totality in the sense of a structure integrating the parts: once objectified, the work keeps on producing itself in response to tendencies at work within it. By the same token the works are not data but centres of gravity straining towards totality, even though they may be subject to preformation by the whole.[1]

If, taking the first sentence, we think of the work of art as a relation between whole and parts, then we need to understand this relation as subject to constant change. This is an incredibly abstract claim. Adorno deliberately does not indicate whether we should think of the whole as *the work constituted of different parts*, or whether we should think of *the work as a part of the whole*. We need to do both simultaneously. This means that we must grasp the practical implications for aesthetic experience for the idea that, which ever way we construe the idea of "whole" and "part" in a particular circumstance, they are always mediated by the other. Consider the Picasso example: we can think of his use of light as part

[1] Aesthetic Theory p.255.

of a whole picture. In so far as Adorno characterises Picasso's use of light as experimental, rather than properly crafted, he suggests it might be read as a symptom of the way fashion has "affected the sensory apparatus" and transformed the way we think of transience in general, and therefore of art. On these terms, Picasso's art is a part of art in general, which is part of a larger whole. At the same time, Adorno concludes, "Typically, [fashions] impact is small in degree and discernible only in recondite features of art."[29] We are back to the idea that we cannot understand one of Picasso's works in terms of the impact of fashion. Fashion becomes a part of what we need to understand a whole work.

Within all these different constructions of the way what is "whole" and what is "part" interchange and over-lap, the relation between whole and part is also different. That is to say, the way a whole relates to its parts may be fundamentally different according to which whole you are talking about. For example, it is obvious that the structure and mechanisms of the way light operates in a painting will be different from the way fashion operates in that painting. Equally, the order and structure of the impact fashion will have on art will change, as will light, as will the relation between light and fashion.

In a sense all this is rather obvious. We could take a work by Picasso and discuss it in terms of light and fashion. Even if we start with these restricted categories, if we do what Adorno shows us we should do when he writes "Aesthetic experience, properly understood, is the complete surrender of the self to the work",[30] we become absorbed into a process that is not just infinite, but needs to be sustained as such

> Finally what becomes engulfed by this dialectical turbulence is the notion of meaning. Since a negative judgement must be passed on history, the unity of process and result is unattainable. Increasingly, the individual moments refuse to accommodate themselves within a preconceived totality, opening a cleavage that destroys meaning. Works of art are not fixed once and for all, but are in flux. This inherent temporality also affects the relation of the whole

[29] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 255.
[30] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 256.

> and parts, a relation which changes over time and is potentially subject to being discontinued entirely.[31]

This brings us back to the idea of meaning as potentially infinite, but restricted by the mortality of the art work. Having posited the very general idea that art is "processural in so far as it is a relation between a whole and its parts", and having absorbed the implications of putting this idea into practice, Adorno now reopens the problem of "duration" as it affects the life of individual works. He begins to restrict the kind of critical intervention within this infinite field of possibilities to that which might be live.

> If works of art have a historical existence owing to their processural quality, they must also be able to perish. As far as the figures are concerned that are engraved on stone, painted on canvas, or drawn on paper, they may well be imprescriptable. But the most important thing, their spirit is not imprescriptible. It can be lost because it is a fluid entity.[32]

What, then are the factors which define the mortality of a work of art *qua* object? We are back to where we were after his critique of classicism, and before he talks about the idea of duration as defined by the bourgeois idea of property. It is not that what has gone on since is an irrelevance; rather that every thing he now says about "duration" needs, at the very least, to be understood as mediated by duration.

At one level, Adorno says, rather obviously, that works of art change with the historically changing attitudes of people. But he is not particularly happy with this argument, and concludes,

> these kinds of changes are extraneous when compared with those that occur in art works themselves, specifically the unpredictable falling away of layers one by one; the determination of this kind of change by the law of form as it manifests and separates itself more clearly; the petrification of works grown

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[31] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 255.
[32] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 256.

transparent; their aging and falling silent. In the final instance, the unfolding of art works is the same as their decomposition.[33]

[33] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 256.

Chapter VI

AESTHETIC THEORY CHAPTERS 4, 5, & 6

Nature and Illusion

Chapter Six of *Aesthetic Theory* looks at the idea of "illusion" and specifically, the "crisis of illusion" in modern art. Adorno organises the argument in the first part of the chapter around the contrast between "illusion" and "materiality", in the second part around the contrast between "illusion" and "expression". In reading the detail of what Adorno is saying, we need to bring to it an understanding of other arguments in *Aesthetic Theory*. For example, at the beginning of chapter 1, Adorno articulates the broad crisis of modern art as its having "come to corrode the very same categories which were its own reason for being", and "illusion" is one such category. Thomas Huhn has claimed that for Adorno, "Illusion is the defining character of art works. An art work is an artwork just so far as it pretends to be something which it is not".[1] He is quite right to stress the necessity of "illusion" for art, but he errs when he implies that the crisis of "illusion" is sufficient explanation for the crisis of modern art. In a footnote Huhn questions Richard Wolin's different reading of *Aesthetic Theory*: "Wolin seems off the mark,...when he describes the crisis of the avant-garde as the crisis of identity, rather than, as I have it, a crisis of illusion".[2] Huhn's claim is interesting in his emphasis on the constitutive significance of "illusion" for art as derived from a close reading of aspects of chapter 6 of *Aesthetic Theory*. Wolin's argument, by contrast, is more loosely based, referring to a wide variety of Adorno's writings. His emphasis on the "crisis of identity" expresses itself through the idea of "de-aestheticization" which "signifies a final

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[1] Thomas Huhn, 'Adorno's Aesthetics of Illusion', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 44 (Winter 85), p. 181.
[2] Thomas Huhn, 'Adorno's Aesthetics of Illusion', p. 188.

dissolution of the essential aesthetic qualities which have up until this century been inseparable from the concept of art itself".[3] For Wolin "illusion" is one of those "essential aesthetic qualities" rather than the sole, or main, grounds for that crisis as Huhn argues.

The criticism of Huhn's-over emphasis on "illusion" would be unfair were it not that he invites the comparison with Wolin, because they do different things. Huhn extrapolates claims about Adorno through the close analysis of a specific text. What comes across in his paper is a strong feeling of what the experience of reading *Aesthetic Theory* might be like. At the same time, the claims he makes are detached from a consideration of the place of that particular argument within *Aesthetic Theory.* In fact, situating the specificity of what Adorno says in any one place is not best thought of as relating the particular to the general. It is more a question of the relation of one particular to another.

The dilemma which the difference between Huhn and Wolin presents is the manner in which the specific claims are made accountable: Huhn inflates the significance of a particular argument, while Wolin explains Adorno's theory of art through an accumulation of dispersed details. Against both critical models the principle of mediation implies that detail is modified or transformed through its relation to other detail, which means understanding context as the relations between different concepts, rather than either their meanings in isolation, or their accountability to generalities. This chapter will consider the problem with which Adorno opens chapter 6, which is his diagnosis and explanation of the crisis facing modern art in terms of the crisis of "illusion". First, Adorno's argument will be set out. Chapters 4 and 5 are an extended exploration of "illusion" in nature, art, and philosophy. Chapters 4 and 5 are some of the most explicitly theoretical in *Aesthetic Theory.* Adorno repeatedly deals with the history of how art and nature have been represented by philosophy and society, and he

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[3] Richard Wolin, 'The De-Aestheticization of Art: On Adorno's *Aesthetische Theorie*', *Telos* 41 (Fall 1979), p. 111.

develops his position as a negotiation between the two. In chapter 6, however, the theoretical conclusions of the previous two chapters are confronted with an account of how various examples of art since 1910 have failed to achieve the theoretically defined ideals developed in the previous two chapters. Thus the crisis of "illusion" presented in chapter 6 has two identities. It is a series of truth claims about the potential failure of modern art *and* a demonstration of the failure of the *Aesthetic Theory qua* theory to match its concepts to art.

Modern Art and the crisis of "illusion" at the beginning of chapter 6

Chapter 6 opens with the statement, "The emancipation from harmony turns out to be a revolt against illusion..."[4] We will recall that one of the ways Adorno has described the crisis of modern art is as its "freedom from external purposes". "Harmony" can be understood as one of those external purposes. Another example are "genres and styles", whose absence, and the ensuing implications for modern art, Adorno discusses in chapter 12.

An illusion, to use Huhn's definition, is "something which pretends to be something which it is not".[5] On what basis does Adorno make such an explicit link between "harmony" and "illusion"? In what sense does harmonious art pretend to be something which it is not? Adorno's indirect answer is that a harmonious work of art is "the fiction of a totality". One way to explain Adorno's thinking is to consider that the definition of the word "harmony" has specifically musical connotations and a more general suggestiveness.

> 1: tuneful sound : melody 2a: the combination of simultaneous musical notes in a chord 2b: the structure of music with respect to the composition of chords 2c: the science of the structure, relation, and progression of chords.

also:

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[4] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 148.
[5] Thomas Huhn, 'Adorno's Aesthetics of Illusion', p. 181.

> 3a: pleasing or congruent arrangement of parts 3b: correspondence, accord 3c: internal calm: tranquillity 4a: an interweaving of different accounts into a single narrative...[6]

A harmonious art work, therefore, is one which has an internal order, and that order can be understood as the fiction of a greater totality which, by definition, is similarly ordered. In other words, a harmonious art work is the illusion of a harmonious world. Adorno makes the musical suggestion in his argument explicit when he goes on to explain how the crisis of illusion in modern art extends even to music:

> To appreciate the depth of crisis of illusion, one must take into account, that it has repercussions even for music, which on the face of it seems to have no use for illusion to begin with. In music fictitious elements die off even in their sublimated form; i.e., not only elements like the expression of non-existent feelings, but also structural aspects like the fiction of a totality, which has been exposed as unrealisable.[7]

This raises two distinct questions about the reasons for the crisis of "illusion". First, is the fiction of a totality unrealisable because the structural principle of harmony has become formally impossible in a strictly musical sense? Or, second, is it the totality of which harmony is a fiction that "has been exposed as unrealisable"? That is, is harmony made spurious *qua* an illusion of something which does not exist? In the previous chapter Adorno gives an indication of what is implied here:

> Once perceived as a transparent untruth, this illusion undermines the possibility of art itself. An asinine army joke in Wilhelmian Germany captured the gist of this dynamic. In it an officers aide gets marching orders to go to the zoo on his day off. When he reports back he is all excited: Sir, he says, these animals don't exist.[8]

To give priority to one or other of these explanations for the crisis of illusion would be to misrepresent the problem by oversimplifying it. This would locate a "solution" to the crisis of art as either formal or social. That it is both, explains the radical nature of the crisis.

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[6] Webster's Dictionary.
[7] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 149.
[8] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 121.

It is a crisis which is not soluble either formally or socially, in that neither the perfect art work nor the perfect society can salvage harmony. This recognition of the insolubility of the crisis of illusion, coupled with its apparent necessity, becomes all the more important where Adorno goes on to identify the parameters within which the crisis of "illusion" has its impact on art.

Let us employ a definition of "harmony" from those listed above as: "the science of the structure, relation, and progression of chords". Harmony is then the structuring principle through which parts of an art work are arranged within it. What happens to art if there are no such principles by which its material might be internally ordered? Adorno pursues the implications of this question in terms of the way it impacts on the "material" dimension of art within the processes of the *production* and *reception* of art. In the second half of the chapter, he discusses the impact of the crisis of harmony for the idea of art as expression.

The arguments of chapter 6 are interesting in themselves, but as I have already suggested, the way chapter 6 is read is also determined by what is going on around it. In particular, I wish to examine Adorno's analysis of "illusion" in chapters 4 and 5, before coming back to consider chapter 6.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 opens with Adorno's discussion of the relation between beauty in art and beauty in nature, specifically the way this has been dealt with by philosophical aesthetics. First, Adorno observes that since Schelling's major work on aesthetics "which he called *Philosophy of Art*, aesthetics has shown an almost exclusive concern with works of art, discontinuing any systematic investigation of 'the beautiful in nature'".[9] Adorno suggests that

[9] *Aesthetic Theory*, p.91.

philosophical aesthetics repressed the idea of natural beauty for two associated reasons. First, because the so called 'religion of art'[10] understands nature as the *object* symbolically reconciled to man by art. In this scenario, the beauty of nature becomes something oddly spurious; it is passive, having no function but to be reconciled to man. Second, Adorno argues that the continued presence of nature in aesthetics "would have touched a sore spot, conjuring up associations of acts of violence perpetrated by every work of art, as pure artefact, against the natural. Wholly man-made the work of art is radically opposed to nature, which appears not to be so made".[11] In other words, the artifactuality of art is revealed by the contrast with the beauty of nature, and this artifactuality *qua* an "act of violence against the natural" does not mesh with the idea of art as containing the means for "symbolic reconciliation" with nature.

What Adorno is doing here, then, is using the critique of an aspect of the history of philosophical aesthetics to define his own position. Adorno is saying that, in as much as an art work is made of the material of nature, it *is* nature, while being different from nature, by virtue of its being man-made. Later in the chapter, Adorno explicitly distances himself from Hegel on precisely this point. For Hegel, Adorno complains, "the beautiful in nature comes into its own only by being eclipsed, whereupon its deficiency becomes the *raison d'être* of the beauty in art...", and "for Hegel natural beauty disappears without leaving a recognisable trace in artistic beauty".[12]

It is the suppression of the consideration of natural beauty in aesthetics after Kant that has "blocked out any reflection upon a dimension of art which lies beyond aesthetic immanence while still being its premise".[13] In other words, the neglect of nature by

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[10] Adorno notes that this is: "a term coined by Hegel, denoting the satisfaction at having achieved symbolic reconciliation in works of art". *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 91.
[11] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 91.
[12] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 112.
[13] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 91.

philosophical aesthetics, ostensibly to concentrate on art, is actually to neglect a significant aspect of what art is. Against Hegel, Adorno says, and this is important, "the determinacy of art is greater than that of nature, but the prototype for expression in art is still nature rather than human spirit".[14] In other words, Adorno's discussion of the beautiful in nature is as integrated into his theory of beauty in art, as is idea of the artwork as of the stuff of nature, despite its man-made status.

Adorno ends his discussion of the suppression of the natural in art by post-Kantian aesthetics with a quotation from Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. Kant compares the appreciation of beauty in art with the appreciation of beauty in nature, favouring the latter. Adorno claims that this demonstrates Kant's ".belief in the fallibility of making"[15] which was lost to "Hegel and his generation".

Immediately upon concluding this discussion Adorno remarks, "The concept of natural beauty has been subject to historical change".[16] He then proceeds to use this premise as a different perspective from which to re-emphasise what he has just been arguing. "Nature" has actually become thoroughly man-made. First, this is because "nature" is a thoroughly "man-made" idea and experience:

> In every perception of nature there is actually present the whole of society. The latter not only provides the patterns of perception in general, but also defines nature *a priori* in relation to itself. Thus the perception of nature is a product of the faculty of determinate negation. As technology and, more important the principle of commodity exchange go on expanding, natural beauty increasingly takes on a merely contrasting function, in which it is easily subject to co-optation by the reified world it opposes.[17]

Thus,

> Integrated into the commercial world (as 'tourist industry', for example) and devoid of its critical sting, the immediate appreciation of nature has become neutralised. As nature becomes more synonymous with national parks and

[14] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 112.
[15] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 94.
[16] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 94.
[17] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 101.

> wildlife preserves, its beauty is purely tokenistic. Natural beauty is an ideological notion because it offers mediatedness in the guise of immediacy.[18]

With a new paragraph Adorno has changed the terms of his engagement with the idea of "nature". Hitherto he has discussed "nature" as a concept of philosophical aesthetics. "Nature" is not sufficiently defined by aesthetics, because the concept is also mediated by its social formation. To engage "nature" as a social phenomenon Adorno has to remove himself from aesthetics to become a cultural theorist.

Adorno's pessimistic prognosis of the impossibility of any "real" experience of nature in capitalist society has resonances in French cultural theory since Foucault. That capitalist society "offers mediatedness in the guise of immediacy" could be said to be one of the guiding principles of that tradition. This has led Lyotard, for example, to claim that to protest about the existing conditions of capitalism is reactionary because it implies some capacity to escape the transformation of any experience, even ostensibly critical experience, by capitalism. It is useful to keep in mind the radical pessimism exemplified by Lyotard, because its extreme implications are very different from the way Adorno develops his position. The first indication of this difference emerges as what appears as Adorno's radical indecision as to the legitimacy of holding to the possibility of any immediate experience in capitalist society. The sceptical claims of the quotations above are interspersed with less sceptical suggestions. Adorno is genuinely and openly contradictory in his analysis of the social mediation of the experience, suggesting that there may still be some kind of residue of "immediacy". Adorno chooses as the object of his analysis the "culturescape" which is an "aesthetic twilight zone"[19] which is neither pure "nature" or pure "culture".

> The prevailing urban society co-opts culturescapes as an ideological complement of itself. Culturescapes can play this role, because while acquescing in the hegemony of urban life, they do not visibly bare the stigmata of market society. This is why the joy of seeing an old stone wall or cluster of

[18] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 101.
[19] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 95.

> medieval houses is spoiled by a guilty conscience. Even so, that joy has survived the objection which tries to make it suspect. As long as the face of the earth keeps being ravished by utilitarian psuedo-progress, it will turn out to be impossible to disabuse the human intelligence of the notion that despite all the evidence to the contrary, the pre-modern world was better and more humane, its backwardness notwithstanding.[20]

Adorno is committed to the ideology critique of the urban capitalist belief in the immediate experience of the historical past and natural beauty. At the same time, there is the suggestion that its potential legitimacy might reside as the "memory" of something different. Likewise, he is explicitly critical of arguments which imply the complete artificiality of experience. "Nowadays even fairly sophisticated thoughts - like the one about how trashy paintings actually disfigure the beauty of real sunsets - become insubstantial through monotonous repetition".[21]

On what basis, then does Adorno amplify these suggestions? Adorno's argument develops into his theory of "natural beauty" and it begins with a crucial claim. The appreciation of natural beauty

> focuses exclusively on nature as appearance, never on nature as the stuff of work and the material reproduction of life, let alone as a substratum of science... Nature is perceived as appearance of the beautiful and not as an object to be acted upon.[22]

In other words, first, *the appreciation of natural beauty* is distinct from any other instrumental attitude towards nature. Second, every appreciation of natural beauty will always have its basis in the perception of nature as it *appears* to consciousness. In the appreciation of natural beauty "What emerges as nature's appearance is no more co-extensive with empirical reality than Kant's thing in itself is with the world of 'phenomena' or with the constitution of objects by the categories".[23] Or, put less philosophically; "natural beauty as an

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[20] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 95.
[21] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 107.
[22] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 97.
[23] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 98.

appearing quality is itself an image".[24] In other words, whether our experience is reified or not, the appreciation of natural beauty is always just an image of nature. For the appreciation of natural beauty at a different time in history, nature *appeared* differently.[25] In other words, "the concept of nature continues to be what it always was: an idyllic, provincial, insular notion".[26] What gives the appearance of natural beauty its quality as an image is its historical mutability.

What this means is that the appearance of natural beauty can only be understood as an image, rather than as an immediate experience, if it is understood historically. This historical understanding takes two shapes. It is only in so far as we understand that nature has been appreciated differently through history that we can understand our own appreciation of it as historical, and therefore as an image. Second, and more subtly, the appearance of beauty itself is the manifestation of a historical consciousness. What does this mean?

> While it is true that nowadays an aesthetic relationship to the past is liable to be poisoned by an alliance with reactionary tendencies, the opposite standpoint of an ahistorical aesthetic consciousness that brushes the dimension of the past into the gutter as so much rubbish is even worse. There is no beauty without historical remembrance. In a state of freedom - particularly freedom from nationalism - mankind would be able innocently to appropriate culturescapes along with the historical past as a whole.[27]

The idea that "the pre-modern world was better and more humane" is just an image, and a dubious one at that, as is the idea of primordial nature. What these images suggest is the possibility of an alternative to the status quo. It is the "historical remembrance" implicit in the appreciation of natural beauty that "represents the recollection of a historical condition

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[24] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 99.

[25] For example:
As long as nature had not yet been repressed, its seeming indomitability was a source of fear. This explains the prediliction once apon a time for symmmetrical arrangement of nature, a prediliction which later gave way to the sentimental mode of appreciating nature with its preference for irregularity and randomness...
Aesthetic Theory, p. 96.

[26] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 100.

[27] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 96.

that may never have existed".[28] It is precisely this image of an alternative which gives the appearance of natural beauty its validity: "Natural beauty is myth transposed into imagination and thus possibly redeemed".[29]

To recapitulate Adorno's argument thus far, the appreciation of beauty in nature is the appreciation of images of nature. As such, these images are detached from empirical reality and, philosophically speaking, have no demonstrable truth content. These images are historically mediated, in so far as they change and are utopian projections onto pre-modern history and nature.

From this Adorno makes the claim that through the history of diverse appearing images of nature, there is a consistency which enables him to make a normative claim about "beauty in nature"

> If there is one characteristic that is peculiar to the beautiful in nature, it has to be the extent to which something non-artefactual has the capacity to speak; this characteristic is expression. The beautiful in nature is that which appears greater when seen from a distance, both temporally and spatially. True this objective expression needs a subjective receptacle, but it does not become identical with it. What the beautiful in nature does is testify to the precedence of the object in subjective experience. Natural beauty is perceived alike as authoritatively valid and as incomprehensible (as a problem asking for solution).[30]

This last sentence is where Adorno makes his objective claim about natural beauty. Whatever character its appreciation takes through history, "Natural beauty is perceived alike as "authoritatively valid" and "incomprehensible". While we are familiar with the first point, the second has not yet been properly discussed. In what sense is natural beauty perceived as "incomprehensible (as a problem asking for solution)"? Earlier in the above quotation Adorno speaks of nature as "non-artifactual [but] has the capacity to speak; this characteristic is expression". The problem of nature's incomprehensibility is that it is

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[28] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 98.
[29] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 98.
[30] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 105.

precisely at the moment that we attempt to realise the promise of image of nature, *qua* an alternative to the status quo, that that promise disintegrates:

> through remembrance appreciation of nature dissolves again into an amorphous quality which devoid of genius, cannot conceive the idea of freedom, let alone realise it. The presumed anamnesis of freedom in natural beauty is false, for where it seeks freedom there is only archaic unfreedom...The song of birds is judged beautiful by nearly everybody. No sensitive person of European background, for example, fails to be moved by the song of a robin after a shower of rain. All the same there is something frightening lurking in the song of birds, which is not really a song but a response to natural necessity. The same frightful threat emanates from flocks of migratory birds; even today their formations bespeak the old practice of divination, forever presaging ill fortune.[31]

Having admitted the illusory quality of the suggestion of something different implicit in the experience of natural beauty, as soon as we try to capture or realise that illusion, nature collapses into the image of the "archaic unfreedom", of natural necessity. The futility of trying to realise "the promise of nature" as offering something different and better than capitalist society leads Adorno to argue that this is not just because nature does not live up to its promise. Rather, the attempt to realise that promise misconstrues the "appearing quality" of nature: "objectifying the appearing quality... tends to wipe out that quality"[32]. For example, "going out of one's way to visit famous beauty spots and such, like drawing cards of the beautiful in nature, is almost always the occasion for disappointment".[33] It is only as an "appearing quality" that natural beauty has value. The attempt to grasp that beauty is to destroy it: "Unconscious apperception knows nature's beauty better than does the ever-ready verbal ecstasy. It is the continuity of unconscious apperception that makes these, at times sudden, glimpses into nature possible".[34] This sets up the dilemma for any appreciation of natural beauty, including art and aesthetics, in their attempts to represent natural beauty.

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[31] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 98.
[32] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 99.
[33] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 102.
[34] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 102.

Here things become complicated. Adorno's explanation of the "incomprehensibility" of natural beauty and the emerging construction of the relation of art and aesthetics relation to natural beauty cannot usefully be distinguished. Although the discussion of "the beauty of art" is obviously different from the discussion of "beauty in nature", art and aesthetics are themselves particularly important attempts to grasp the "incomprehensibility" of natural beauty. Indeed, Adorno's discussion of their attempts to do this are constitutive of his emerging explanation of the "incomprehensibility" of natural beauty. This is not a crisis in Adorno's argument, but a crisis in the way it has been unpacked here. The discussion so far, especially in its later stages, has extracted Adorno's "theory of natural beauty" from how art and aesthetics can engage the appearance of natural beauty. In their presentation in chapter 4, these arguments are not easily separable.

Art and the appearance of natural beauty as explaining the "incomprehensibility" of the appearance of natural beauty.

Adorno develops a tightly defined theory of how art might engage the appearance of natural beauty, and explains various conditions of its attempts to do so by looking at historical examples of art.

To grasp the theory, we need to recall that at the beginning of chapter 4, Adorno argued that the experience of nature persists in art *qua* the "dimension of art which lies beyond aesthetic immanence while still being its premise".[35] It follows that art has a double, contradictory, relationship to nature. On the one hand, as material, art is of nature. On the other hand, nature is also appreciated as "appearance" and not the "stuff of work". The condition of the "appearance" of natural beauty is not just the contrast with the "material" of the work of art, but is the "image quality" as described above. Now Adorno writes,

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[35] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 91.

> Art is influenced by the fact that nature is not yet what it appears to be; and this condition will last as long as nature is exclusively defined in terms of its opposition to society. Art accomplishes what nature strives for in vain: it opens its eyes. Nature in its appearance - that is nature in so far as it is not an object to be worked upon - in turn provides the expression of melancholia, peace or what have you. Art stands for nature by abolishing the latter in effigy. Naturalistic art, on the other hand, attains only specious affinity with nature because, like industrial production, it reduces nature to raw material.[36]

This is dense and is anticipating a great deal. For the moment, however, what is important to understand is that the way Adorno defines the significance of art is that it attempts to do what nature cannot do, namely to, bring into realisation its promise of an alternative to the status quo. Simply to replicate, as does "naturalistic art", an image of nature is to produce a copy of a copy. This argument is obviously reminiscent of Plato's critique of mimesis in his Theory of Forms. Plato's case against mimesis derives from his argument that the object which an artist apprehends is itself but a copy of an ideal object to which the artist has no access. That the product of the mimetic act will be an unreliable picture of reality, a copy of a copy, is a result of the artist's inability to apprehend the truth of his object. Now, for Adorno, the "naturalistic artist" commits a similar order of error: "natural beauty as an appearing quality is itself an image. Hence to try to replicate it is like committing a tautology".[37] This is not because, as Plato argued, such an artist has no access to some "ideal nature". Rather, the naturalistic artist reduces the appearance of nature which "...provides the expression of melancholia, peace or what have you"[38] to a raw material. This is precisely to deny the possibility of the appreciation of natural beauty because, we will recall, the appreciation of beauty in nature "focuses exclusively on nature as appearance, never on nature as the stuff of work and the material reproduction of life, let alone as a substratum of science... Nature is perceived as appearance of the beautiful and not as an object to be acted

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[36] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 97.
[37] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 99.
[38] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 99.

upon".[39] Moreover, the naturalistic artist also fails because "by objectifying the appearing quality, replication tends to wipe out that quality".[40]

Now, the theoretical impetus for Adorno's critique of naturalistic art derives from its inadequacies in the light of his theory of the appearance of beauty in nature. What is less easy to anticipate is how art might represent nature without: a) "committing a tautology", b) treating nature "as an object to be acted upon" or c)"objectifying an appearing quality". Now, these questions do not begin to be treated in detail here in chapter 4. Rather, as I have already suggested, the answers Adorno gives in this context are more concerned with illuminating the problem of natures "incomprehensibility". This begins to re-emerge out of his critique of naturalistic art and, curiously, a more apt way of dealing with nature's "incomprehensibility" hinges on the choice of subject matter:

> Even unsophisticated people brand painted Matterhorns and flashy sunsets on canvas, to mention only the most glaring examples of this type, as kitsch. What we have here is an intuitive understanding of the irreplicibility of natural beauty as such. The discontent with naturalistic portrayals of natural beauty articulates itself in reference to extreme cases like the ones mentioned above, the idea being that this strategy will implicitly protect the sanctity of the zone of the 'tasteful' imitations of nature. This will not do. The green forest of the German impressionists have no greater aesthetic value than the Königssee painted by a third rate painter who supplies hotel chains with his out put.[41]

The German Impressionists are probably a soft target, but Adorno defends French Impressionism on the basis of a significant difference from the Germans. The French did not choose for their subjects "pure nature", but "either artificial themes like ballet dancers or racing jockeys or dead nature, as in Alfred Sisley's images of winter, or landscapes pockmarked with emblems of civilisation of a kind that would lend constructive support to form, as in the paintings of Pissarro".[42] In other words, these are examples of naturalistic art

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[39] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 97.
[40] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 99
[41] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 99.
[42] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 99.

which do not represent nature as "pure", but in images which testify to the beauty of nature as appearance by implicitly referring to the latent historicity of what is being represented. "The beautiful in nature is history standing still and refusing to unfold. Those works of art which are justly known for their sensitivity to nature tend to incorporate this notion".[43] The images of nature represented by these artists are of artificial subjects; they represent nature as "dead" or as being encroached on by civilisation. This theme is expanded a few lines later where he writes,

> At all times the pictorial representation of nature seems to have been authentic only when it was *nature morte*: when it had the ability to interpret nature as an encoded historical message, if not as a message of death itself.[44]

In other words, still life painting does not seek to depict nature naturistically as appearing image, but naturalistically as something which is already historical, already dying. Nature appears decaying or, in a state of impending decay. He continues:

> In this context, the Old Testament prohibition of graven images can be said to have an aesthetic aspect besides the overt theological one. The interdiction against forming an image - of something - in effect implies the proposition that such an image is impossible to form. Through duplication in art, the appearing quality in nature looses its being-in-itself on which appreciation in nature feeds. Art remains loyal to natures appearing quality only when it conjoures up natural scenaries in the artistic expression of their negativity.[45]

Now, this argument has taken place around the discussion of the inadequacy of naturalistic art and Adorno's explanation of how some exceptional examples of it apparently avoid the general criticism. The major theme which needs to be highlighted here is the impossibility and inadequacy of any *direct* attempt by art to represent the appearance of natural beauty. In a section of *Aesthetic Theory* quoted above, Adorno remarks "Art stands for nature by abolishing the latter in effigy". The "effigy" is precisely the image of the appearance of natural beauty which cannot be directly realised. Naturalistic art, which, as in the examples above, represents

[43] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 105.
[44] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 100.
[45] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 100.

nature as compromised, seem to suggest a potential alternative. The manner of that suggestion is in Adorno's terms, to approach the problem presented by the appearance of natural beauty indirectly. A very important suggestion of what this might imply is the statement: "art is imitation of the beautiful in nature, rather than imitation of nature".[46] Now, of course, the naturalistic artists Adorno has described as having a measure of success in this task did not do so at Adorno's behest, nor are the claims about their work at all obvious. Rather, what his analysis of these works is doing is revealing "the allegorical intention of art which manifests the beautiful in nature without decoding it. It grows in relation to the growth of non-objectifying meanings and non-denotative languages".[47] This is because "Art imitates neither nature or individual natural beauty. What it does imitate is natural beauty as such".[48]

Making a normative claim for "natural beauty" as distinct from "the appearance of natural beauty", Adorno has said, "Natural beauty is perceived alike as authoritatively valid and as incomprehensible (as a problem asking for solution).[49] This is what art imitates and

> This puts the finger on the paradox of aesthetics as a whole, which is intimately tied up with the paradox of natural beauty. The subject matter of aesthetics too is defined negatively by its undefineability. That is why art needs philosophy to interpret it. Philosophy says what art cannot say, although it is art alone which is able to say it: by not saying it.[50]

Now, the structure of this paradoxical relation between aesthetics and art clearly echoes the same extreme problematic Adorno has diagnosed as defining the relation between art and the appearance of natural beauty. Just as the appearance of natural beauty cannot "speak", and needs art to "teach it to speak", so art needs philosophy to interpret it. What needs to be remembered however, is that within their similarly patterned problematic, art and

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[46] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 105.
[47] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 105.
[48] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 107.
[49] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 105.
[50] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 107.

philosophy are different mediums. For example, earlier in chapter 4 Adorno associated the appearance of beauty in nature with art in contrast to philosophy. The contrast centres on the "instant" of the appearance of beauty in nature and art with the duration of philosophical argument:

> The objectification that careful contemplation causes is detrimental to the dimension of nature that speaks meaningfully. Incidentally, the same may be true of works of art; perhaps they are only perceptible in *temps dureé*, the term Bergson seems to have derived from artistic experience... Besides spontaneity, will and mental concentration are needed as well - a contradiction that cannot be liquidated by decree... analytical reflection restores the *temps dureé* through the medium of its antithesis. Analysis terminates in beauty. Analysis subjectively retraces the trajectory described objectively by the work. Thus adequate knowledge of aesthetic matters is the spontaneous recapitulation of objective processes taking place in the work owing to the tensions therein.[51]

What then emerges out of chapter 4? The appearance of natural beauty sets the agenda for art, while the appearance of natural beauty promises something it cannot deliver. Adorno says it is the purpose of art to deliver what nature merely promises. There is the strong suggestion that this will be impossible. Chapter 4 ends,

> While nature's language is mute, art tries to make this muteness speak. In so doing art is constantly exposed to the danger of failure because of the insurmountable contradiction between teaching nature to speak - a Herculean effort - and the fact that such a result cannot be willed or intended.[52]

Within this extreme difficulty art needs aesthetics to achieve what it sets out to do. In Hegel natural beauty is made obsolete by art and art is made obsolete by philosophy. In Adorno, nature, art and philosophy all have significant functions. What pertains to all of them is that their truth value cannot be "willed or intended". The problem for art is to "imitate the appearance of natural beauty", but this will necessarily be incomplete without philosophical reflection. This, likewise, must be a "spontaneous recapitulation of objective processes taking place in the work owing to the tensions therein".

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[51] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 102-103
[52] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 115.

Chapter 5: Art and Illusion

Chapter 5 begins:

> Nature's beauty consists in appearing to say more than she is. Now the idea behind art is to wrest this 'plus' from its contingent setting in nature, appropriating nature's appearance and making it determinate, which means among other things negating its unreality.[53]

Works of art are man-made, but this difference from nature does not guarantee their achieving the appropriation of nature's appearance. As we saw with the critique of German Impressionism, even for something to be *de facto* art guarantees nothing with respect to Adorno's demands for art's appropriation of nature's appearance. On the contrary, Adorno says that "Works of art become works of art, only when they produce that surplus which is their transcendent quality. They are not an arena where transcendence occurs, which is why they are also separated from their transcendence".[54] Or, making the same point negatively, he writes, "Art falls below its standards and becomes *entkunstet*, desubstantialized, when it fails to attain transcendence. The same betrayal occurs when art seeks transcendence as an effect"[55]

As a precondition for making sense of this argument, we need to become accustomed to the idea that those objects which we are used to calling "art" are not actually "art" in the sense of Adorno's definition of the term. Aside from the claim itself, Adorno's mode of expression is odd because he personifies works of art, implying they have the capacity to act. He says things like "in works of art *become*..." or, "works of art must *do* such and such..." One way to explain this apparent eccentricity is to refer to the first sentence of chapter 10.

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[53] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 116.
[54] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 116.
[55] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 116.

Here Adorno claims "The experience of art is adequate only when it is live".[56] As he goes on to explain what he means by this, it is clear that what constitutes the experience of an art work as "live" is contingent on both an *object* and the *experience* of it. In other words, not just any object can be experienced as a "live" work of art, but neither can a work of art be considered to be "live", without an appropriate experience of it. By personifying the "work of art", Adorno is talking about it *qua* a mediated constellation of moments whose vitality is contingent on both a particular kind of object and a particular kind of experience. More to the point, the "live" experience of a work of art cannot be taken for granted it does not present itself as such. On the contrary, this status must be achieved, striven for; works of art have to "become" works of art. This process of becoming, Adorno calls the work of art's "transcendence".

To attain "transcendence", works of art must try to make themselves into something more than their difference from nature *qua* artefacts, but they cannot achieve this "transcendence" of their material state if they aim directly for it. In order to achieve "transcendence", they must do more,

> Arts man-made plus does not by itself guarantee to art any metaphysical content. If we assume the latter to be nurgatory, this does not imply that works of art cannot posit a plus of appearance. The true arena of transcendence in works of art is the integration of their moments. By straining towards unity while at the same time adapting to unity, the moments of the work of art go beyond their appearance.[57]

To understand what Adorno means by the work of art's "transcendence", we need to grasp the different senses in which the word "appearance" is being used. On the one hand, we have seen that nature's beauty derives from its appearing quality. On the other hand, by virtue of being man-made, works of art "appear" to be more than nature, but Adorno is explicit that this does not constitute their quality as art works. On the contrary, "The true

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[56] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 252.
[57] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 116.

arena of transcendence in works of art is the integration of their moments".[58] It is this which allows art works to "go beyond their appearance". In the present context Adorno is characterising the "appearance" of works of art as their difference from nature by virtue of their being man-made. This appearance of being more than nature needs to be transcended because it is "purgatory".[59] In beginning to define art's transcendent quality, Adorno says, "The element most akin to transcendence is expression...",[60] and "The instant of expression in works of art is not their reduction to the level of material *qua* immediate reality but a complex phenomenon of mediation".

Taking art's transcendent, beyond material, quality as nothing more specific than a "complex phenomenon of mediation", what is beginning to emerge is a paradoxical idea of the work of art as man-made artefact which *appears* to be more than it is, *and* the work of art as a transcendent quality. In the context of the claim of the previous chapter that "art is imitation of the beautiful in nature, rather than imitation of nature",[61] this should not come as a surprise. If art is to be an imitation of the beautiful in nature, it must be the imitation of an *appearance*. What stands in the way of its achieving this? There are two, quite distinct, reasons for art to fail. If art is simply tied to its difference from nature by its artifactual quality, it fails. If art attempts to imitate the appearance of nature directly, it also fails because "Through duplication in art, the appearing quality in nature looses its being-in-itself on which appreciation in nature feeds".[62] Thus "Art falls below its standards and becomes *entkunstet*, when it fails to attain transcendence. The same betrayal occurs when art seeks transcendence as an effect".[63]

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[58] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 116.
[59] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 116.
[60] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 117.
[61] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 105.
[62] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 100.
[63] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 116.

Now, in the previous chapter we saw that the latter problem was apparently bypassed in the examples of successful naturalistic art. These managed to represent the appearance of natural beauty. What Adorno is now saying, however, is different and new. He is saying that if art is to *imitate*, rather than represent, it must in some way imitate nature *qua* appearance: art must itself be an *appearance of an appearance*.

To begin to come to terms with what this might imply, we need to return to Adorno's claim for the work of art as man-made artefact, *appearing* to be more than it is, *and* the work of art as a transcendent quality. In expanding the implications of this claim, Adorno relates his argument to the psychological idea of the *Gestalt*. This states that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. While suggestive, the *Gestalt* is insufficient because "The artistic moments in their total context intimate what falls outside this context".[64] Or, to put this slightly less cryptically, the idea of the *Gestalt* allows for the idea that the parts of an object are mediated by their place in the whole, but that whole is not understood as further mediated.

Adorno's rejection of the adequacy of the idea of the *Gestalt* would imply that what he means by the "moments of a work of art" are better understood as the configuration of mediating factors defining the way a work of art appears at a particular time. This idea is emphasised when Adorno now proceeds to liken what he is arguing to Benjamin's idea of "aura". Benjamin's argument is extremely important, both in establishing a dynamic which is central to Adorno's theory, and in Adorno's various departures from Benjamin claims.

In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", Benjamin defines the "aura" of a work of art as all those aspects which impinge on the experience of a work of art which cannot be reproduced. This broad context is, as Benjamin puts it:

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[64] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 117.

> thoroughly alive and extremely changeable. An ancient statue of Venus, for example, stood in a different traditional context with the Greeks, who made it an object of veneration, than with the clerics of the Middle Ages, who viewed it as an ominous idol. Both of them, however, were equally confronted with its uniqueness, that is, its aura.[65]

Benjamin has diagnosed a fundamental contradiction here: the Greeks and the Medieval clerics had experiences of the same material art object, but in completely different ways. At the same time the "aura" of the material presence of the work of art endorses and underwrites the idea that these, actually historically contingent experiences, are taken to be uniquely valid and certain. From the perspective of Adorno's argument, the statue of Venus is "appearance", in the sense that natural beauty is appearance. Ideas of art change through history, just as do ideas of nature, so that nature and art will seem different at different times. No historical idea of art can claim absolute authenticity, so they are all appearances. Second, *qua* artefact, the work of art confronts us with its uniqueness and the absolute authenticity of our immediate experience of it, but this is itself just appearance. Now, the normative in the experience of the appearance of natural beauty was that it was experienced as having both "absolute validity" and as "inexplicable". The experience of the art object is also experienced as having "absolute validity", but it is not necessarily as "inexplicable".

For Benjamin, in complete contrast to the experience of the original, the mechanical reproduction of the work of art is without "aura" and fails to radiate a feeling of " absolute validity" to its viewer. The relationship between the viewer and the work of art becomes unstable, making the viewer aware of the contingency of the relation between them. Thus, according to Benjamin, the separation of art from "aura" means that, "for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work from its parasitical dependence on ritual".[66]

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[65] Walter Benjamin "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"?
[66] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 226.

Notwithstanding Benjamin's hostility to "aura" and his optimism in the liberating power of technology, it is important to remember that Adorno has alluded to Benjamin's idea of "aura" when he remarks, the "true arena of transcendence in works of art is the integration of their moments..."[67] Adorno now needs to answer, on his own terms, what this implies and it hinges on how the "appearance" of "absolute validity" of the direct experience of the work of art is understood:

> Appearances in the true sense are appearances of an other. Now, works of art become appearances in this sense when they put the accent on the unreality of their real being.[68]

This is saying two things: an appearance is both "of another" and "unreal". We have seen that successful naturalistic representations of nature had that success by virtue of their presenting the appearance of natural beauty so that its appearing quality could be identified as such. Nature was variously represented as tenuous. Adorno is now saying that, in order for works of art to become appearances, then art works must likewise emphasise the "unreality of their real being" which is their "appearance of absolute validity" and present themselves as tenuous. How might this be achieved? We have already been told that the moment of expression is a "complex phenomenon of mediation", and this is what we need to be prepared for.

Adorno says "works of art are after-images of pre-historical shudders in an age of reification, bringing back the terror of the primal world against a background of reified objects".[69] We need to remember that the "live" experience of the work of art is contingent on both object and experience. The experience of art is, like the experience of everything else, reified. Reification is the historical condition of experience that creates the ubiquitous appearance of immediacy, including the appearance of immediacy in our relation to art works

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[67] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 116.
[68] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 118.
[69] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 118.

qua objects. It is not just the materiality of art works as objects which presents us with their immediacy, it is also reification. So, countering the expectation of immediate experience generated by the presence of the object and the reification of experience, Adorno writes,

> The more pronounced the hiatus between the discrete, contoured individual objects on the one hand and the paling essence on the other, the more empty the gaze the works of art - the only reminiscence of the fact that there has to be something besides this hiatus.[70]

It is precisely the inadequacy of the immediate experience of the art work which constitutes its value. Where Benjamin had celebrated the disappearance of "aura" as the disappearance of the feeling of "absolute validity" before the work of art, Adorno defends the persistence of "aura" as the presumption of the "absolute validity" of the experience of art, generated by reification. It is the failure of the experience of art to live up to this expectation which gives art its value.

Having arrived at this point, Adorno's argument needs to be located in terms of the claims he has made for the relationship between art and the appearance of beauty in nature. In chapter 4, immediately after stating that "art is the imitation of the beautiful in nature, rather than the imitation of nature", Adorno remarks,

> This component grows together with the allegorical intention of art which manifests the beautiful in nature without decoding. It grows in relation to the growth of non-objectifying meanings and non denotative languages. The preconditions for them are historical through and through.[71]

He has also said that this "cannot be willed or intended",[72] and that "adequate knowledge of aesthetic matters is the spontaneous recapitulation of objective processes taking place in the work owing to the tensions therein".[73] All this needs to be kept in mind when considering what Adorno has just said about the experience of art. The value of the appearance of natural

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[70] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 118.
[71] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 105.
[72] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 115.
[73] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 102-103

beauty derives from its promise of a different kind of experience from the status quo, as a memory of something which may never have existed. The appearance of natural beauty is taken as having absolute validity while at the same time being inexplicable. A similar movement is taking place here. On the one hand we have the art object and reified experience which generate the idea of the "authoritative validity" of the work of art. On the other hand we have its inexplicability, its "paling essence". It is the "hiatus" between them that says "there has to be something besides hiatus". Adorno goes on to explain what art is achieving here in terms of its relation to philosophy,

> Thrown back upon itself, enlightenment moves farther and farther away from its goal, which is some kind of objective certainty. Hence under the strain of its ideal of truth, enlightenment is forced to retain what it tends to discard in the name of truth.

This is a definition of Adorno's philosophical position. The recognition of the impossibility of objective certainty implies the necessity for philosophy to maintain doubt, which is at the same time a negation of its self-definition. This is by no means Adorno's unique observation. Various philosophers have taken the inadequacy of philosophy and projected its solution onto art and aesthetic experience. On the contrary, for Adorno, there is no such hierarchical difference between art and philosophy of this, or Hegel's kind. Rather art, as Adorno has just described it, is both inseparable from its unfolding by philosophy, and from in its relation to the dynamic of enlightenment just described.

> Art as *mnemosyne* [aid to the memory] is this kind of retaining operation. The instance of appearance of works of art is the paradoxical union or balance between a vanishing and preserving tendency, for art works are static and dynamic at the same time.[74]

Now, where for Benjamin "aura" was the obstacle to the real experience of art, we see that for Adorno, aura persists. At the same time, the crucial "hiatus" between expectation and

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[74] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 118.

experience which he has identified as giving art its value is far from guaranteed. We have seen that the "transcendence" of works of art is not guaranteed by their difference from nature as man-made, nor is it if a direct attempt is made at transcendence. These constraints on art work as object and its production are mirrored by what happens to art under reification. The value of art, as Adorno has just described it, is far from guaranteed because the expectations for art generated by reification are predicated on removing the hiatus just described as so important.

> The two extreme forms of *Entkunstung* of art, therefore, are reification - art viewed as a thing among things - and psychologism - art viewed as a vehicle for the psychology of the viewer. The reified works of art which have ceased to speak, are made to say the things the viewer wants them to say and which are the stereotyped echo of himself.[75]

For Adorno, Benjamin was quite wrong in his predictions of the destruction of "aura". The opposite has come true. The universal availability of quality reproductions of art, far from liberating the experience of art, has brought home art's innate obscurity, and so feed the desire for the "authentic". All that is left of works of art now, in terms of Benjamin's argument, is the "aura" of the original works; their physical presence. Thus,

> The growing independence[from Benjamin's definition of "aura"] of works of art, their objectification by man, makes it appear as if their shudder were completely unmitigated and unheard of. The act of alienation that is part of that objectification is a corrective in all art. Works of art are neutralised and qualitatively changed epiphanies.[76]

It is precisely "aura", qua the idea that there is more to a work of art than its physical existence as an object that Benjamin does not allow, and is increasingly becoming the case. If there is no "aura" to an art work, then there is no suggestion that an artwork can be more than its physicality; it cannot thus be the appearance of something else. With this argument against Benjamin, Adorno introduces a new word to describe what he wants to defend as the

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[75] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 25.
[76] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 119.

appearing quality of art, namely its "apparitional" quality as such.[77] He says, "Works of art collude with apparition, especially in the way an apparition rises above people beyond the reach of their intention, beyond the reach also of the world of things".[78] This ephemeral quality of art arises not, as Benjamin argues, because it is free to mean anything once released from "aura," and to generate "shock" in its surprising and disorientating relation to other images. Rather, for Adorno the apparitional quality of the art work derives first from the emphasis that what it is is not equivalent to its materiality: "In every work of art something appears that does not exist".[79] What does not exist is the possibility of an experience of the world which is not reified. That which thus appears in art cannot do so overtly; it can only appear as "ciphers": "art works do not place these ciphers before our eyes as though they really existed, which is what fantasies do".[80] Here Adorno starts to locate the apparitional quality of art "between" the "appearance of the beautiful in nature" and "denotative thinking". The apparitional quality of art is more determined than the former in terms of its forms, and the extent to which those forms appear. This makes it like denotative thinking, but not the same as it.

So the apparitional quality of art is thus different from the appearance of natural beauty, but this apparitional quality of art "does not exist" for reified consciousness. This is because the non-existent in art is the possibility of transcending reification. Art presents the possibility that the transcendence of reification could be made substantial, that is definitively achieved - but reification cannot thus be achieved by art. Both Idealist aesthetics and romanticism believed erroneously in this possibility. Against them, what is important about art works is that "they call forth philosophical reflection on the question of how and why they

[77] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 119.
[78] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 119
[79] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 121.
[80] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 122.

- as figures of the existent and yet unable to impart life to the non-existent - can become images that overwhelm being, and how it is that the non-existent is not sufficient unto itself but requires art".[81]

This philosophical reflection on art which is what is enacted in *Aesthetic Theory*, leads to the following series of claims. It is as apparitions, i.e. suggestions of something which does not exist, which makes works of art "images". Their image quality does not derive from being "copies". What are art works images of? They are images of society. "What appears in art is no longer the ideal of harmony or of anything else. Today art's emancipatory quality seems to lie in dissonance and contradiction".[82] But it is precisely this dissonance and contradiction which does not exist for reified consciousness. Now, as "images", works of art represent duration. That is to say, their image quality derives from their claim to posit something which does not exist, i.e. dissonance and contradiction. Against this, as appearances, which is how they are known by philosophical reflection on them, they represent transience. In the discussion of the mutual dependence of philosophy and art, we saw that art can exist for mind and being. Here, what Adorno is saying is that for being, works of art appear to represent something which does not exist under reification, i.e. dissonance and contradiction; as such they seem to have duration. For mind, however, works of art do not have such duration. It is only as a function of philosophical reflection that they can exist as the appearance of *something*, but as such they represent transience. "Art works *qua* images represent duration, whereas *qua* appearances they represent transience".[83] Put another way, as images of something which does not exist, artworks exist as something definite and tangible through their duration as such. To be any thing more than apparitional,

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[81] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 123.
[82] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 124.
[83] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 125.

to be the appearance of *something* other than reification, they can only exist in a state of extreme transience, like, for example, fireworks.

It is as the appearance of *something* that works of art are "spirit", which defines them as art. "If spirit does not appear, works of art do not exist any more than does spirit".[84] This is what defines a "live" work of art as such, and it is what gives works of art their truth value. At the same time, however, Adorno is clear that spirit is but one moment of a work of art.

> Critique interprets the spirit of works of art on the basis of the configurations in them, confronting the moments with each other and with the spirit as it appears to them. In so doing critique passes over into a truth beyond the realm of aesthetic configurations. That is why criticism is an essential and necessary complement of art works. Criticism recognises the truth content of works in their spirit, or alternatively denies that they have any truth content because they have no spirit. The only place where art and philosophy converge is in the act of criticism - which is a far cry from philosophy dictating to art what its spirit ought to be.[85]

This might be taken as an account of the foregoing discussion of the possibility of the truth of art. Adorno the philosopher considers the way works of art are configured in relation to reification. "In every work of art, the moment of spirit is in the process of becoming and formation; it is never at rest".[86] This is because the appearance of spirit is a function of the relationship between art work, history and its philosophical critique within that matrix.

What this means has already been suggested in the discussion of various examples of naturalistic art in chapter 4. In that case, philosophical critique diagnosed the significance of the idea of the appearance of nature as transitory. It then explained how various works testified to the transitory nature of the appearance of natural beauty. Chapter 5, which we have just discussed does not however engage such concrete examples of more modern art. Rather it has attempted to develop a series of principles on which art might be engaged by philosophical critique. As we have seen, in the context of reification the crucial tension within

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[84] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 130.
[85] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 131.
[86] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 135.

the art work is the relation it can be demonstrated as maintaining between itself as a durable image of something which does not exist, and as transitory appearance, revealed in the process of its unfolding by philosophical critique.

This whole formula comes into crisis in chapter 6 from two different angles.

Chapter 6

At the beginning of this chapter there was a preliminary discussion of the opening statement of *Aesthetic Theory* chapter 6. This is the statement "The emancipation from the concept of harmony turns out to be a revolt against illusion". From the perspectives of having read chapters 4 and 5, this statement takes on a particular significance. We have seen that the truth of an art work is a function of a number of mediating themes. Notable is its relation to philosophical critique. We have also seen that this relationship is embedded in a contrast between art revealing itself as duration as the image of something impossible, and its transience in its philosophical unfolding to reveal its truth. The latter, its momentary taking on the appearance of *something*, is completely contingent on its appearing to posit something that does not exist. Now, to posit something which does not exist for reification, is to posit dissonance and contradiction. The problem chapter 6, confronts this with is that, to reintroduce Gombrich, representation is contingent on resemblance *and* it matters that there should be resemblance.

Now, the first part of chapter 6 describes how modern art has rejected the idea of harmony, and with it the possibility of art as an illusion of a totality. That is to say what appears to be in its duration is not some "wholeness" beyond reification. In any case this is precisely what the reified experience of art seeks. It either equates art's truth with the object, or sees the art work as the vehicle for psychological expression. Against this, under

modernism, the revolt against harmony has become the revolt against the organisation of material per se. Consider that one definition of "harmony" is as "the structure of music with respect to the composition of chords".[87] then the rejection of harmony is then not just the rejection of a whole, but a rejection of the idea that an artwork should be structured at all. Adorno identifies two responses to this crisis as it impinges on the making of art. One is the rush by modern artists to look for new principles of construction (this will be discussed more fully in the penultimate chapter when I look at chapter 1 of *Aesthetic Theory*). The other, which preoccupies Adorno in the first half of chapter 6, is the introduction of "phantasmagoric" elements into art. In the sense which Adorno is using the word here, it means the presentation of art in such a way as to emphasise the different simultaneous relationships of its material to the viewer. The most obvious example here is the double status of a piece of newspaper in a cubist collage. It is both a piece of the real world which the painting represents, and has a formal or structural function within the painting which it shares with the paint itself. Interestingly, this idea of art holds together two traditionally viewed attitudes to making art as virtually identical. The extreme realism of the end of the nineteenth-century is seen as essentially continuous with the newspaper in cubist works because both are "ashamed of everything that tended to disclose the mediations of its pretended immediacy".[88] Thus, "Artificiality was effaced, disappearing in the autonomous framework of the product. The only thing the act of positing left behind was aura..."[89]

Parallel with the crisis modern art generates for the theoretical arguments of chapters 4 and 5 is the related dissolving impact philosophical analysis has on art. While philosophical critique is necessary for the revelation of the truth of art, such reflection also corrodes its structure. Thus,

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[87] see footnote [6].
[88] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 150.
[89] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 151.

> The most objectified works of art dissolve into a teeming mass of components - e.g. texts dissolve into words - as soon as they are viewed at very close range. the more one is sure of holding in ones hands the details of a work of art, the more inevitably does this sense of possession disintegrate into amorphous indeterminacy. This shows just how mediated works of art are. It also shows how aesthetic illusion manifests itself in the structure of art.[90]

Now, contrary to Bürger's reading of him, Adorno states that "The validity of the revolt against illusion and its invalidity - namely the false hope that aesthetic illusion might be able to pull itself out of the morass by its own bootstraps - are inseparable from each other". Bürger has argued that Adorno is *de facto* hostile to art which simply "posits" rather than makes. From one perspective, he is, but equally Adorno understands its validity and inevitability. Moreover, where Bürger sees Adorno's problem as a narrowness towards recent art, Adorno's position is more complex and integrated than Bürger gives him credit for. Adorno's position is permeated by its own failure. The crisis of modern art is also a crisis in the capacity to theorise about art, and the possibility for art to be true at all. Like Hegel's Aesthetics, *Aesthetic Theory* has an internal strength which makes Bürger's kind of criticism some what dubious.

The problem with art which seeks to evade its artifactuality is that, despite itself, it is "always a replica or reality", even while seeking to be reality itself.[91] It is this which introduces the next part of Adorno's argument, where he seeks to describe an art which might somehow transcend the crisis of illusion. The problem he addresses is "whether art is able to outlive illusion".[92]

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[90] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 149.
[91] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 152.
[92] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 149.

Expression, Mimesis and Autonomy

With this we can return to the problems of the second half of chapter 6. The situation here is obviously related to the crisis of philosophy after Hegel. Where the idea of the sufficiency of reason posits an ideal relationship between concept and object, it also generates a speculative integrity. The concept of the harmony of the work of art plays a similar role. Thus, the crisis of *Aesthetic Theory* as philosophical form in the absence of sufficient reason parallels the crisis of art in the absence of harmony.

The way artworks confront the problem is through "expression" and "expression in art is mimetic".[93] Expression, thus defined is no panacea because "Mimesis is the ideal of art, not some practical method or subjective attitude aimed at expressive values";[94] mimesis cannot be achieved directly. Equally problematic, under the critique of philosophy every work of art, even the one that tries to hide its artifactuality as simple matter, is "always a replica of reality". This is because "the mimetic mode of behaviour in art has been progressively infiltrated by illusion - the organ of mimesis since the archaic taboo on mimesis - virtually becoming the vehicle of illusion..."[95] However unintended or unworked, a work of art *qua* man-made object will never achieve absolute immediacy. It always replicates reality by virtue of being made by man. The question is, can art achieve this replicatory relation to reality in an active way? As we have seen, it cannot be effected directly and "expression" therefore, has nothing to do with the projection of subjective feelings: "If expression were merely a duplicate of subjective feelings, it would not amount to anything".[96] Instead he says "a better model for understanding expression is to think of it, not in terms of subjective

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[93] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 162.
[94] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 164.
[95] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 162.
[96] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 163.

feelings, but in terms of ordinary things and situations in which historical processes and function have been sedemented, endowing them with the potential to speak".[97]

In explaining what he means, Adorno uses language as an example. Adorno associates art's mimetic capacity with one aspect of the "dual nature of language". One side of language is the communicative aspect, which, Adorno defines here as its "linguistic construction". The other side is "mimetic language". For Derrida, language is distinguished between its signifying capacity and its discursive structure. Adorno does not make that distinction here; for him the communicative capacity of language derives from its discursive structure which is contrasted with "mimetic language". Thus,

> The efforts of modern prose writers such as Joyce, who set discursive language aside or, to say the least, subordinated it to the idea of form to the point where the linguistic construction becomes indecipherable, might be explained as attempts to move from communicative to mimetic language.[98]

Having made this distinction between "discursive" and "mimetic" moments in art, Adorno now considers art by comparison with philosophy. From this perspective, philosophy is "discursive, where art is "mimetic". This leads Adorno to say that "the true language of art is speechless".[99] Here he indicates that painting and sculpture are the most "speechless" arts, and thus "Art's speechless moment has priority over the significative one of poetry (which is found to some extent even in music)".[100] That is, in terms of its modern manifestation, art, as opposed to poetry and music, is the least significative and therefore the most different from philosophy. It is consequently the most susceptible to philosophical critique *qua* the unfolding of its moments. Despite himself and his own musical background, Adorno is allowing his philosophical identity to determine his attitude to art. It is the "speechlessness" of a work of art which he most obviously equates with the "hiatus" between

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[97] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 163.
[98] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 164.
[99] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 164.
[100] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 164.

the immediate experience of the art object and the inadequacy of the experience of it as art. In other words, the mimetic potential of art, which is the potential to represent the world indirectly, is art's speechlessness. If "expression is the gaze of an artwork"[101], that gaze can only be made to "speak" by philosophy.

This discussion has considered art as it presents itself to philosophy. Now he talks about art from the perspective of its production and his attention is directed towards the relation between work of art and world. From this perspective, he says "expression is a function of both method and mimesis".[102] Here the crisis of art becomes virtually identical to the crisis of *Aesthetic Theory*. To see this we need to recall Adorno's emphasis on stringency in the deployment of philosophical concepts. The mimetic aspect of art emerges out of its production, but through the history of its development towards modernism, art has become detached from its "rules" of production. To see this we need to consider the idea of "autonomy" and Adorno's development of it in chapter 12.

Chapter 12

The idea of "autonomy" can be tied quite specifically to the category of society. This is because when Adorno speaks of art as "autonomous", he is talking about its autonomy from society. Adorno begins by looking at the vexed question of how art can be conceived as a social category. As we have come to expect, the categories and terms used in the analysis of the art of the past need to be modified. Adorno claims that by comparison with previous art, there is heightening awareness of social content in advanced art. He acknowledges this is a paradoxical claim to make, since one of the definitions of autonomy he gives as "art's growing independence from society".[103] Indeed, he suggests that until its emancipation in the

[101] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 165.
[102] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 167
[103] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 320.

bourgeois era, there had been a great deal of direct social control over art which was extended particularly through a control of genres and styles. These direct social influences are not the focus of Adorno's interest in the discussion of advanced art because they have become relatively insubstantial: artists no longer orientate themselves with reference to this kind of convention.

The waning significance of styles and genres does not signal a reduction in the impact of society on art, but a transformation of the structures through which society expresses itself therein. Emancipation from genres and styles means paradoxically, that "there is a sense in which bourgeois society can be said to have integrated art more completely than any previous society".[104]To explain himself Adorno contrasts the novel with the chivalric epic. In an obvious sense the stylistic rules which govern the formal organisation of the chivalric epic are far more rigidly defined by convention than are those for the novel, which is characterised by its formlessness. It might seem obvious that the level of social intervention in the chivalric epic is more powerful than in the novel. In fact, the opposite is true because in the chivalric epic, experience had to be forced into a given genre. In the novel, by contrast, art is faced with an influx of experiences which are no longer made to comply with the rules of a genre. Instead of being prescribed, form has to be created out of these experiences "from below, as it were". As a consequence, "No longer sublimated by the principle of stylisation, the relation of content to the society from which it springs is thus rendered much more direct"[105]

A way to clarify and broaden the perspective on this argument is to recall Gombrich's idea that an individual representation is always mediated by a tradition of previous representation. Adorno's argument endorses this scheme up to a point but part of what defines modern art's "autonomy" is its emancipation from precisely this kind of traditional

[104] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 320.
[105] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 320.

influence. Artists are no longer tied either to the tradition of representation, or to more specific styles and genres. It is not that Gombrich is wrong, but that his argument cannot be applied to the development of autonomous art.

The problem, indeed the crisis, of modern art is that it has not only the absence of genres and styles, but that it has not properly engaged the implications of this emancipation. Rather, "artists everywhere were quick to look for some new presumed foundation for what they were doing".[106] One of Adorno's central principles is to represent this tendency to look for explanations as a continuing crisis.

> The nominalistic work of art is supposed to organise itself from below rather than submit to ready-made principles of organisation foisted on it from above. But this is impossible. No work that is left to its own devices has the power of self-organisation and self-limitation...[107]

Here we are returned to the situation of Adorno's earlier critique of art which attempts to evade its "artifactuality". In the past the experiential "content" of art was forced into a given genre or style and given form in the process. In the present, without the impact of genres and styles, there is no such form giving framework. It becomes impossible to raise art beyond artifactuality.

At the beginning of this chapter there was a preliminary discussion of the opening statement of chapter 6 of *Aesthetic Theory*: "The emancipation from the concept of harmony turns out to be a revolt against illusion." From the perspective of having considered chapters 4, 5, and 12, this statement takes on a particular significance within the framework of *Aesthetic Theory*. We have seen that the mimetic potential of a work of art is a function of a number of mediating themes. Notable are its relation to philosophical critique, the attempt to replicate reality in an active way, and the impossibility of trying to do so without styles and genres. These stipulations define the (im)possibility of mimesis in art and can be related to

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[106] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 1.
[107] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 313.

Adorno's main theoretical explanation of the relation between art and the appearance of natural beauty.

Through philosophical unfolding, art reveals itself as the image of something which is impossible. Its momentary taking on the appearance of something that does not exist is completely contingent on its appearing to posit something which does not exist. To posit something which does not exist is not an absolute problem; it takes place within reified experience. Within reification it is impossible to posit dissonance and contradiction. Dissonance and contradiction appears as the "hiatus" between the work of art as object and the experience of it. For this "hiatus" to be taken to represent something beyond reification, it has to "matter" that it should. Modern art, in its attempts to express the world as something other than a harmonious whole, rejects the very thing on which the dissonant experience of "hiatus" depends. That is to say, for "hiatus" to appear thus, there has to be the possibility of the adequate experience of harmony. This is what modern art rejects in its production: modern art rejects harmony as a principle of construction. The same dissolution of harmony takes place in the philosophical unfolding of the "speechless" work which dissolves into "amorphous immediacy" in being thus scrutinised.

What emerges at the end of chapter 6 is a situation where the present impossibility of mimesis in art is represented in such a way that, there is a mutually supporting constellation of theoretical, philosophical, historical factors which all point in the same direction. *Aesthetic Theory*, qua philosophical aesthetics collapses, as philosophical aesthetics because of the definitive inadequacy of conceptual representation of the nonidentical. It also collapses as mimesis, because the object it imitates is in collapse. If we take Adorno's 'conclusions' in isolation, then he is not significantly different from poststructuralism. Poststructralism works,

or attempts to work, within the context of Adorno's conclusion. Lyotard does not see this when he reads Adorno as follows

> The category of the subject remains uncriticized. It is the c not only of the interpretation of society as alienation and of art as martyred witness, but of all theory of expression. That the subject, and consequently its so-called expression, may itself be a product, and not a producer, Adorno would have been able to doubt only by doubting representation. The critique of representation would have lead him to the critique of politics (even "Marxist" politics), and of dialectics. To raise doubts about representation is to manifest the theatrical (in music, in paintings, in politics, in the theatre, in literature, in film)... We have the advantage over Adorno of living in a capitalism that is more energetic, more cynical, less tragic. It places everything inside representation, representation doubles itself (as in Brecht), therefore presents itself.[108]

Part of what Lyotard is saying here, particularly in his representation of Adorno's commitment to "expression," is simply wrong. As we have seen, Adorno rejects the possibility of subjective "expression". The second part of the quotation, however, is revealing because Lyotard mobilises the familiar criticism of Adorno that capitalism is simply more sophisticated than Adorno allowed. Capitalism "places everything inside representation, representation doubles itself (as in Brecht), therefore presents itself".[109] Adorno accepts that capitalism "places everything inside representation", but at times rejects Lyotard's pessimistic development of this argument and, in his critique of the "phantasmagorical" in art and particularly of the cubist use of collage, Adorno rejects Lyotard's assertion that art has to become "theatrical" in the absence of its capacity to represent directly. These similarities and differences between Adorno and Lyotard are significant in distinguishing Adorno from poststructuralism, and in explaining the apparent scepticism towards art as it is developed in chapter 6 of *Aesthetic Theory*. To clarify these issues we need to look more carefully at the comparison of Lyotard and Adorno, particularly Lyotard's influential definition of "postmodernism".

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[108] Jean-François Lyotard, 'Adorno as the Devil', trans. Robert Hurley, *Telos* 19 (Spring, 1974), p. 128.
[109] Jean-François Lyotard, 'Adorno as the Devil', p. 128.

Lyotard and Adorno

Lyotard gives the following account of the "modern" in the Introduction to his book *The Postmodern Condition*:

> to the extent that science does not restrict itself to stating useful regularities and seeks the truth, it is obliged to *legitimate* the rules of its own game. It then produces a discourse of legitimation with respect to its own status, a discourse called philosophy. I will use the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative...[110]

"Modernism" is defined as scepticism towards dogmatic assumptions about the "truth" of our knowledge of the world, while retaining the misplaced self-confidence of dogma. "Modernism" is engaged in positing truth claims, whose status as such, it acknowledges cannot be taken for granted and must be legitimated by reference to some higher authority. Seen in the light of its deconstruction by "postmodernism", and despite its radical rejection of dogma, the "modern" enterprise partakes in its own misguided metanarrative. It is the assumption of the possibility of some higher authority of "truth" and "meaning" to underwrite its own claims. Now, as we have seen, this is nothing like Adorno's position. If we recall his critique of Heidegger, we will remember that "mind", which makes truth claims which are taken to represent the world, is coexistent with "being", which sees the inevitable inadequacy of those truth claims. In other words, what for Lyotard are the definitively different "Modernism" and "Postmodernism", in Adorno are the simultaneous components of experience.

Lyotard says that the positive implication of "Postmodernism" is that it is a context where there is complete tolerance for the "incommensurable".

> Where after the metanarratives can legitimacy reside? The operativity criterion is technological; it has no relevance for judging what is true or just...Postmodern

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[110] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Bennington & Massumi, Manchester University Press, 1986. p.xxiii.

> knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our *sensitivity* to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable.[111]

From Adorno's position, all this is doing is allowing the "incommensurable" because judgement is impossible. The "incommensurable" is not so, because it has nothing to be "incommensurable" from. In Lyotard's scenario, tolerance for the "incommensurable" is simply the inability to make judgements about anything.

The question of judgement is raised powerfully in one of the most telling contrasts between Adorno and Lyotard. This is in their different attitudes to the radical student politics of the late 1960's. Martin Jay quotes Habermas as describing Adorno adopting a "strategy of hibernation" which, in Jay's words, seemed "woefully inadequate" to the New Left in Germany of the late 1960's. He goes on to relate an episode which seemed to crystallize these feelings:

> In April 1969, three members of a militant action group rushed onto the podium during one of his lectures, bared their breasts and 'attacked' him with flowers and erotic caresses. Adorno unnerved left the lecture hall with students mockingly proclaiming that 'as an institution Adorno is dead'.[112]

Meanwhile, Lyotard was at the heart of precisely the constituency which so despised Adorno. Lyotard was for a long time a militant of the far-left group *Socialism ou Barbarie* which, Peter Dews argues:

> anticipated and may even have directly influenced, many of the key themes of the May Student uprising. Having left *S ou B* in 1963, Lyotard at that time a philosophy teacher at Nanterre, and therefore the epicentre of the revolt, became active in the *Mouvement du 22 Mars*, the spontaneist ant-authoritarian wing of the May movement. "The movement of '68"' Lyotard wrote in the introduction to his first anthology of essays, "seemed to us to do and say on a grand scale what we sketched out in words and actions in miniature and by anticipation...[113]

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[111] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern condition*, pp. xxiv-xxv.
[112] Martin Jay, *Adorno*, (London: Fontana, 1984), p. 55.
[113] Peter Dews *Logics of Disintigration*, (London: Verso, 1987), p. 111.

The contrast between Adorno and Lyotard could not be much starker. Very quickly, however, the position represented by Lyotard at this time came to be seen by himself and others on the French radical left to be completely compromised. Indeed the significance of May 1968 for subsequent French theory as a whole, and Lyotard in particular, is now seen precisely in its undermining of the idea of any possibility of a revolutionary political action. As Douglas Kellner suggests in his book on Baudrillard, by the early 1970's in France

> The reaction against Marx and Freud...was also conditioned by the failure of the May 1968 revolts to produce more dramatic and lasting changes. Disillusionment and 'left melancholy' set in, and thinkers like Baudrillard began to abandon their revolutionary hopes and pretensions.[114]

In *Economie Libidinale* (1974) Lyotard begins to come to terms with the implications of the failure of the May movement for his own position. He developed a kind of extreme nihilism which Vincent Descombes sees as pessimistically implying that: "Lyotard considers it reactionary or reactive to protest against the state of the world, against 'capitalism', if we like."[115] This idea has a familiar echo. Where have we come across a similar refusal to endorse political activism before? Well Adorno of 1969 does for a start, but in fact the whole of Adorno's theoretical career since the early 1930's is motivated by the kind of problematic which Lyotard and Baudrillard were just beginning to deal with by the early 1970's.

As was described in chapter 2, Adorno's agenda was hugely influenced by Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* and the essay 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' in particular. The circumstances against which this work was written are worth briefly recapitulating because they parallel closely the extreme change in direction of Lyotard's career. Five years before *History and Class Consciousness* Lukács had written *The Theory of The Novel*. In a new Preface for the 1962 edition he describes the book as "written

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[114] Douglas Kellner, *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), p. 122.
[115] Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. L. Scott-Fox and J.M. Harding, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 181.

in a mood of permanent despair over the state of the world. It was not until 1917 that I found an answer to the problems, which "until then, had seemed to me insoluble."[116] It is clear that his despair was both directed externally towards world events and internally towards his own inability to theorize rationally a valid alternative. In the Autumn of 1918 Lukács gave up lecturing in aesthetics at Heidelburg University and joined the Hungarian communist party. During the Hungarian Commune of 1919 he was Commissar of Culture, and after its collapse he escaped to Vienna where he was arrested and imprisoned in the Steinhof Lunatic Asylum. It was here that he wrote much of *History and Class Consciousness*. It is a work written by a failed communist party official, coming to terms with that failure.

If there are obvious parallels between Lukács' and Lyotard's experience of the failure of political action, it is equally important to understand that their reactions to the abject failure of their political aspirations were very different. As Descombes puts it, for Lyotard: "If Marxism is not true, this is not because it is false, but because nothing is true"[117]. Lukács' response, however, is as we have seen more complex and involved for him a complete rethinking of the aspirations of Orthodox Marxism. As we have also seen, the thrust of Lukács' strategy was to reinvigorate the latent Hegelian character of Marxism. Adorno continues this theme and for him the possibility of some kind of resistance to capitalism, however negligible, remains a possibility. For Lyotard and Baudrillard this kind of prelapsarian faith in the persistence of subjectivity is misplaced metaphysics.

The problem with Lyotard is that he understands subjectivity as vulnerable to his particular brand of scepticism. For Adorno, it is not. For Adorno, the ultimate significance of subjectivity is far from guaranteed, but its potential exists *in* the dialectical structure of experience. For the Hegelian tradition of which Adorno is a part, this is fundamental. In a

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[116] Georg Lukács, *The Theort of The Novel: A historicalphilosophical essay on the forms of great epic literature*, trans A.Bostock, (London: Merlin, 1978), p.12.
[117] Vincent Descombes *Modern French Philosophy*, p. 181.

recent discussion of one of Hegel's early essays on skepticism, it has been pointed out that the kind of skepticism Lyotard's position represents is of questionable value. Hegel's argument has been summarized as follows:

> Hegel's story of the decline of ancient skepticism into its anemic modern counterpart goes something like this: the initial phase of skepticism was a negative *ascesis* toward experience and the world that has its positive side only in matters of conduct. Since the world is an illusion, we should seek to suspend judgement about it, and not attempt to give an account of it or seek to explain this illusion. Consistent with this negation of the world, Pyrro wrote no books. Second, skepticism became a philosophical school, attacking its opponents and defending its own views with arguments and demonstrations. But when skepticism became a philosophical *school*, it had to be expressed in writings that involved formulation and communication of doctrines. Thus the "development of skepticism" amounts to a decline from the noble ascetic practice of the *epoché*.[118]

The most important implication of this differentiation between 'ancient' and 'modern' skepticism is that to say anything philosophically interesting about meaning and skepticism one must compensate for the fact that even in the act of articulation one is already implicitly engaging 'meaning' and 'truth'. Understood this way, 'meaning' and 'truth' are actually incredibly resilient, unavoidable even. What I mean by this is, as Hegel's discussion of skepticism shows, and as Adorno emphasizes, it is impossible not to produce 'meaning' and make claims to 'truth'. Philosophy does not therefore have to defend them because they are literally impossible to avoid. The only way to be consistently skeptical is to say nothing, like Pyrro. Lyotard can diagnose the absence of any guarantor for the relation between a 'speech act' and the world it purports to describe, but he makes no compensation for this idea as it pertains to its own reception. People understand his argument, and judging by its impact, believe him. Where Lyotard theorises the end of subjectivity, his identity as subject and author of *The Postmodern Condition* persists in his practice, where "meaning" is prescribed and incommensurable and exists in the very denial of its own possibility. As Steven Connor

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[118] Robert Williams, 'Hegel and Scepticism', *The Owl of Minerva: Biannual Journal of the Hegel Society of America* 24 (Fall 1992), p. 72.

has cogently pointed out, denouncing the possibility of truth and value is one thing, to operate without them is another. Connor cites Habermas' critique of Derrida as having its basis in what Habermas identifies as 'performative contradiction'. In Connor's words:

> For Habermas, to enter into critical discourse at all is to accede to the orientation towards consensus implicit in all rational exchange. To attempt to undermine these norms and values within one's own discourse, as thinkers such as Foucault and Derrida do in Habermas' view, is to place oneself in a condition of intolerable and enfeebling self-refutation.[119]

Derrida's self-refutation lies in his denunciation of the possibility of truth and value while even in this denunciation, he is making a claim to truth. The big difference between Adorno and Derrida is that where Derrida is perpetually seeking to get beyond the problem, Adorno acknowledges its inevitability, and seeks to internalise it within the practice of his theory. So, although Adorno's project parallels the deconstructive momentum of Derrida, that attitude in isolation is perceived by Adorno to be one-sided and contradictory. Things just do not work out that way. Value, truth claims, and subjectivity all persist in the behaviour of deconstructive theorists and the historical matrix of the production and reception of their work. For Adorno, the symptoms of "identity thinking" (the tendency to posit an unproblematic phenomenological relation between language and referent, concept and object) are themselves not amenable to exhaustive rational critique because, no matter how hard you try, they will inevitably resurface in the effort to surpass them. According to Habermas, what separates Adorno and Derrida is that the former

> does not slip out of the paradoxes of self-referential critique of reason; he makes the performative contradiction within which this line of thought has moved since Nietzsche, and which he acknowledges to be unavoidable, into the organized form of indirect communication. Identity thinking turned against itself becomes pressed into continual self-denial and allows the wounds it inflicts on itself and its objects to be seen. This exercise quite rightly bears the name of negative dialectics because Adorno practices determinate negation unremittingly...This fastening on critical procedure that can no longer be sure

[119] Steven Connor, *Theory and Cultural Value*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 15.

> of its foundations is explained by the fact that Adorno (in contrast to Heidegger) bears no elitist contempt for discursive thought.[120]

As we have seen, for Adorno it is Hegel who first gives systematic expression to the idea that what a philosopher says and does must be integrated and mutually sustaining. We have seen that Heidegger, Derrida and Lyotard can all be characterised as having two distinct aspects of their philosophical identity. All three of them behave very rationally at times; Heidegger in his critique of Western philosophy and science, Derrida in his critique of Saussure and Lyotard in his critique of Orthodox Marxism. All of them arrive through rational argument at a position which denies the possibility of critical reason. This sets up a second phase in their philosophical identities, which defends the "irrational" *per se*. All Adorno does is to emphasise that the irrational is already present in the apparently rational 'first phase' of each of these philosophers. The rational is equally present in the supposedly "irrational" second phase. This means that *Aesthetic Theory* should not be read as either "modern", or "postmodern" on Lyotard's definition. It is the *movement* between the two. I will leave Adorno to answer Lyotard with a quote from *Aspects of Hegel's Philosophy*:

> Hegel's critique strikes at the empty centre of the static analysis of knowledge into subject and object that the currently accepted logic of science takes for granted, the residual theory of truth according to which the objective is what is left after the so-called subjective factors have been eliminated, and the blow he strikes is so deadly because he does not set up an irrational unity of subject and object in opposition to that analysis but instead preserves the distinct *moments* of the subjective and the objective while grasping them as mediated by one another.[121]

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[120] Jürgen Habermas, "On Leveling the Genre Distinction between, Philosophy and Literature" in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. F.Lawrence, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1987), p. 185

[121] T.W. Adorno, 'Aspects of Hegel's Philosophy' in T.W.Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1993), p. 7.

Chapter VII

AESTHETIC THEORY, ART HISTORY AND CRITICISM

Although it is fundamentally different from Hegel's *Aesthetics*, I have argued that *Aesthetic Theory* is similarly consistent with itself. This consistency is constituted of various "movements". Each movement is the dissolution of concept towards something else. We have seen this as a movement from traditional aesthetics to the historical preoccupations of *Aesthetic Theory*. It is also the digressive nature of some of Adorno's argument. In the analysis of Chapter 7 of *Aesthetic Theory* it was the movement from "artifactuality" in general to the infinite specificity of the particular artifact. Through Chapters 4, 5 and 6, a theory of mimesis is developed, but it is revealed as unachievable by art. Each of these movements is a disintegration, but Adorno's argument does not conclude as the result of these disintegrations. It is, as we saw at the end of the previous chapter, the revelation of the process disintegration in its specificity which is significant.

In the first half of this chapter I will read Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* as a kind of "inverted" image of *Aesthetic Theory*. That is to say, the presuppositions of Gombrich's argument mesh with the illusionistic art he describes. Together they give his work an internal consistency which relates to the internal consistency of *Aesthetic Theory*. The difference between the two works is that in *Aesthetic Theory* all the coordinates of Gombrich's argument are in a 'movement' towards their dissolution. In the second half of the chapter the implications of comparing *Aesthetic Theory* and *Art and Illusion* will be explored. Specifically, we will examine the way this comparison characterizes 'modernism' in general as the process of the collapse of the pre-modern. This reading of 'modernism' will be

contrasted with critical and historical accounts of modern art which have emphasized its continuities with the past.

Aesthetic Theory and *Art and Illusion*

In his Draft Introduction to *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno mentions Lukács' *The Theory of The Novel* as an influence on his approach to aesthetics.[1] Elsewhere, he describes it as having "established a standard for philosophical aesthetics that still holds today".[2] The framework of Lukács' position is well known. Broadly speaking, he argues that the unity of the epic form arose from a corresponding unity defining Greek experience. The novel, by contrast, emerges in an age of alienation where existence is experienced as fragmentary and without certain meaning.

It has been suggested that the significance of this argument for Adorno is twofold.[3] First, Lukács emphasizes the historicity of aesthetic forms, developing a central insight of Hegel's *Aesthetics*. That is to say, forms like the epic and the novel are identified as particular to different historical moments.

The second broadly significant area of Lukács' argument for Adorno lies in one of its conclusions. That is to say, *The Theory of the Novel* can be read as presenting a powerful and original strategy for defending the legitimacy of the fragmentary, non-organic form of the novel and, by extension, of "advanced art" in general.

For Adorno therefore, *The Theory of the Novel* is important as a defense of "advanced art", described within the context of a particular theory of modern experience. If

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[1] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 457.
[2] T.W. Adorno, 'Extorted Reconciliation: On Georg Lukács *Realism in Our Time*' in *Notes to Literature: Vol 1*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 217.
[3] Peter Hohendahl, "Artwork and Modernity: The Legacy of Georg Lukács", *New German Critique* 42 (Fall 1987), p. 38.

we think of *Aesthetic Theory* in these terms, then its subject extends beyond the usual parameters of a work of philosophical aesthetics, like Hegel's *Aesthetics*; it is a theory of style. At this level *Aesthetic Theory* engages a wide ranging debate which has traditionally preoccupied art historians. Like the basic premises of *The Theory of The Novel* and *Aesthetic Theory*, the big methodological disputes in the history of art history can be traced to assumptions about the nature of experience and whether and how experience is held to impinge on the development of art. Moreover, consciously or unconsciously the terms of the debate have largely been defined by Hegel's legacy.

From an art historical perspective, Gombrich, for one, has repeatedly drawn attention to the dependence of art history on Hegel's arguments. He has stated: "It is my belief that Hegel is the father of the history of art". At the same time, he argues that while Hegel's impact on art history is enormous, it is also unwelcome: "I still believe that the history of art should free itself of Hegel's authority, but I am convinced that this will only be possible once it has learned to understand Hegel's overwhelming influence."[4] Gombrich's antipathy to Hegel focuses on what he sees as the erroneous emphasis on the idea that experience changes through history and that art is subject to those changes.

Seen from the perspective of Adorno's philosophy, Gombrich's critique of Hegel, together with his broadly Kantian alternative, defines his methodology, his working definition of art, the art he discusses, and the structure, form, and content of his argument. Seen in this light, Gombrich's work emerges as a significant foil against which to understand *Aesthetic Theory*, which, as has been suggested, can be described as a systematic attempt to counter the kind of position Gombrich's argument exemplifies at every level.

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[4] Ernst Gombrich, "Hegel and Art History" in Porphyrios, D. (ed.) "On the Methodology of Architectural History", *Architectural Design* (1981), 3.

A way to expand on the terms of this approach to reading *Aesthetic Theory* and *Art and Illusion* is to consider a brief excerpt from the Introduction to *Art and Illusion*. In the passage concerned, Gombrich is keen to distance himself from a model of perception which "critics, artists and historians have hitherto used with confidence". This is the assumption that when we perceive the world, we first gather "sense impressions" which are subsequently elaborated, distorted, or generalized. In countering it Gombrich enlists Popper:

> K.R. Popper has dubbed these assumptions the 'bucket theory of the mind', the picture that is, of a mind in which 'sense data' are deposited and processed. He has shown the unreality of this basic assumption in the field of scientific method and the theory of knowledge, where he insists on what he calls the 'search-light theory', emphasizing the activity of the living organism that never ceases probing and testing its environment.[5]

The immediate significance of Popper's model of perception for Gombrich is that it "shifts from the stimulus to the organism's response". Instead of images being a product of simple impressions which are "received" and subsequently elaborated upon, images are a product of our *action* of "probing and testing" the environment. Gombrich repeats two metaphors used by Popper to distinguish between the different theories of perception: the "bucket theory" and the "searchlight theory". Their juxtaposition crystallizes the essential difference between an understanding of perception as either *passive* and *receptive*, or as either *active* or *responsive*. In the context of this contrast there is no question that the "searchlight theory" is more plausible and it does not need to be contested here. Instead, I want to consider some of the ramifications of the "searchlight" metaphor from a different perspective.

By comparison with the bucket which simply receives, a searchlight actively responds to stimuli and can be directed and focused on different phenomena, but it always remains detached and distant from its object. That is to say, while a searchlight can actively reveal

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[5] Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, (London: Phaidon, 1959), p. 23.

differences and changes in the object of its focus, those changes never come to threaten its own aloof, objective status. To put this claim for perception into a wider context, Gombrich admits that the theoretical model for his argument "ultimately goes back to Kant".[6] At the beginning of the Introduction to *The Phenomenology* Hegel criticizes a key aspect of this part of Kant's argument with an uncannily resonant metaphor:

> To be specific, it takes for granted certain ideas about cognition as an *instrument* as *medium*, and assumes that there is a *difference between ourselves and this cognition*. Above all, it presupposes that the Absolute stands on one side and cognition on the other, independent and separated from it.[7]

Hegel's critique of Kant has already been discussed. In a negative sense Hegel's argument creates a radical instability for Kantian philosophy which, fused with its object, has the ground for any claim to objectivity removed. In the terms of our discussion of Gombrich, change no longer takes place within the limits that sustain the "searchlight" metaphor. The metaphor collapses because perception cannot be taken to be anchored in the idea of detached observation, since the act of perception is itself conceived of as transformative of the subject.

While this critique of the Kantian subject is relatively simple to comprehend, what is less easily grasped are the range of its implications for Gombrich's argument. In the passage from *The Phenomenology* quoted above, Hegel is simultaneously criticizing Kant's theoretical model of perception *and* his self-understanding of his own role as a philosopher in relation to his object. If we extend the form of this critique to Gombrich's argument, then his "searchlight theory" is revealed as more than a metaphor for perception as it defines art - the most obvious function of Gombrich's theory of perception. It also defines his own relation to

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[6] Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, p. 24.
[7] G.W.F.Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V.Miller, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p 47

art as an art historian and, in turn, affects his definition of art. In other words, the "searchlight theory" of perception permeates Gombrich's program systematically.

To flesh out this claim and its implications, it is important to consider specific examples of Gombrich's critique of Hegel and Hegelianism in art history.

Gombrich on Hegel and Art History

To help us see the way Hegel's ideas have defined art history, Gombrich identifies his influence in three broad areas. First, is what he describes as Hegel's "firm belief in the divine dignity of art". Second, is the idea of "historical collectivism" and third is "historical determinism".[8] All these ideas, according to Gombrich, have been used erroneously by art historians to explain stylistic change.

Taking issue with the first claim, it is clear that for Gombrich, art is not justified by the metaphysical assumption of the existence of a divine presence to which it gives expression. Rather, implicit in his own argument is the idea of the human dignity of art. The derivation for this idea is most obviously Kant's broad project of attempting to demonstrate the moral significance of the individual's judgement in the absence of any metaphysical guarantee of truth.

In his emphasis on the moral responsibility of the judging individual, Gombrich believes that Kant, not Hegel, suggests the correct paradigm of behavior. Not only does Kant suggest a human rather than divine justification for art, but his example suggests the proper art historical method:

> It was Immanuel Kant who insisted on the stern and frightening doctrine that nobody and nothing can relieve us of the burden of moral responsibility for our judgement: not even a theophany, such as Hegel saw in history. *'For'* - he writes - *'in whatever way a Being might be described as Divine...and indeed appear so'*, this cannot absolve anyone the duty *'to judge for himself whether he is entitled to regard such a Being as a God and to worship it as such'*. It

[8] Ernst Gombrich, "Hegel and Art History", p. 3.

> may well be that Kant demands here more than is humanly possible, and yet much would be achieved if the insight that Kant was right gained ground in the world of art.[9]

The way Gombrich is using Kant against Hegel here obviously goes beyond a critique of their different justifications for art. He contrasts Kant's demand for individual responsibility in judgement with the Hegelian art historian who, in deferring to some extra-artistic guarantor of value, implicitly abdicates responsibility for his own judgement in a methodological and professional sense. Hegel, according to Gombrich, not only provides a questionable justification for the broad significance of art, he also represents a paradigm for bad, or at the very least, lazy art history. The same theme is extended when we consider Gombrich's second and third criticisms of Hegel's latent presence in accounts of the history of style: "historical collectivism" and "historical determinism". In speaking of "historical collectivism" Gombrich means the way art historians have ascribed changes in style to groups, nations, ages, etc. Likewise, the idea of "historical determinism" wrongly implies an inevitability in the development of style towards a predetermined goal. Questioning these ideas, Gombrich's critical strategy follows a familiar pattern, and he is uncompromising. It is not simply a question of good or bad art historical method, it is simultaneously a question of morality.

> I have discussed elsewhere why this reliance of art history on mythological explanations seems so dangerous to me. By inculcating the habit of talking in terms of collectives, of 'mankind', 'races', or 'ages', it weakens resistance to totalitarian habits of mind.[10]

While we might have some sympathy with Gombrich's critique of these aspects of Hegelianism in art history, it is equally obvious that his alternative has its philosophical justification in his confidence in the judgement of the 'autonomous' individual. The same paradigm extends to Gombrich's idea of the artist.

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[9] Ernst Gombrich, "Hegel and Art History", p. 9.
[10] Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, p. 17.

As we might expect, the direction of his argument comes from his theory of perception and ranges itself against the implications of the "bucket theory". Gombrich argues that the artist does not perceive the world directly: "contrary to the hopeful belief of many artists, the 'innocent eye' which should see the world afresh would not see it at all. It would smart under the chaotic medley of forms and colours."[11] In the production of art, the organizational principles necessary to form representations are never passively reproduced by the artist. For Gombrich, therefore, art never immediately or naturally represents the world, but is always mediated by *previous representation*:

> All art is "image-making" and all image making is rooted in the creation of substitutes. Even the artist of an 'illusionist' persuasion must make the man made, the 'conceptual' image of convention his starting point. Strange as it may seem he cannot simply 'imitate an objects external form' without having first learned how to construct a form.[12]

Style, on this analysis, becomes the product of a skillful process of "making and matching" within the context of a tradition of representational art. While the techniques for making representational images have to be learned, this tradition carries expectations which need to be fused with the peculiar demands of matching a specific representational image to a particular object. The representational artist's skill is defined as manipulating this tension between 'creation' and 'imitation' and it is through skill that the artist resolves it. It is this process of making and matching which accounts for stylistic transformation, not the Hegelian art historian's appeal to extra-artistic force:

> As long as we have no better hypothesis to offer, the existence of uniform modes of representing the world must invite facile explanation that such a unity must be due to some supraindividual spirit, the 'spirit of the age', or the 'spirit of the race'... but I would assert that what is their [Hegelian art historians] greatest pride is in fact their greatest flaw: by throwing out the idea of skill they have not only surrendered vital evidence, they made it impossible to realize their ambition, a valid psychology of stylistic change.[13]

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[11] Ernst Gombrich, "Meditations on a Hobby Horse", in Ernst Gombrich, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and Other Essays on The Theory of Art*, (London: Phaidon, 1963), p. 9.
[12] Ernst Gombrich, "Meditations on a Hobby Horse", p. 9.
[13] Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, p. 17.

Considering this theory of the production of art in the way we looked at Gombrich's Popperian model of perception and his critique of Hegel, a familiar theme emerges. At the centre we find the artist actively engaged with a tradition of representation, from which he must literally learn how to represent. Obviously the images the artist produces will be informed by the peculiarities of that tradition. At the same time, these peculiarities are always seen to be different solutions to a *constant* problem of reconciling conventions with the demands of a single representation. The artist's task will vary, but the parameters of the problem remain defined by the representational paradigm.

Art and Illusion, representational art, and Positivism

At its centre, Gombrich's program is a powerful and plausible account of stylistic transformation. His argument centres around some basic assumptions about epistemology, the nature of art, its history, and the methodology of the discipline of art history. While different aspects of this argument can be questioned, they form a cohesive whole which, seen as such, is remarkably resistant to metacritique. Put another way, we get a sense from reading Gombrich that his methodological and epistemological assumptions function beyond their immediate roles in ways which are somehow sympathetic to the objects they describe. We might go so far as to say that there appears a kind of symbiosis between the various coordinates of his program.

This hypothesis can be refined by considering Gombrich's position in a wider context and bringing it back to a confrontation with Adorno. This can be affected if the methodological characteristics of Gombrich's program are bracketed within a broad

definition of Positivism, which, it has been argued, defines itself around three basic tenets.[14] First there is *methodological monism*, which is the idea of the unity of scientific methodology amidst the diversity of subject matter under investigation. Second, is that the exact natural sciences set an ideal for all other sciences. Third, there is the idea of causal scientific explanation which consists in the subsumption of individual cases under hypothetically assumed general laws of nature.

These three parts of the definition of Positivism apply respectively to methodology, the aspirations of that methodology, and the nature of the object. Gombrich develops a methodology that can be applied to all examples of representational art. The universality of this method derives from the scientific claim that the physiological ground of perception is unchanging, and all representational art develops out of a constant tension between a tradition of "making" art and "matching" it to a specific object.

Most important, however, the same tripartite scheme extends to representational art if it is understood as method, rather than just as the "object" for art history. For example, the Positivist model which we have applied to describing Gombrich can equally be applied to the parameters defining representational art. On Gombrich's terms, representational art is taken to be a universally valid method of depicting the world in all its diversity. Representational art is defined by the aspiration for an accurate "match" between itself and its object. Particular objects are accurately pictured when the laws of representation are brought to bear on their particularity.

The suggestion of a common "positivism" in Gombrich's program and representational art is not to suggest that art and art history are essentially the same kind of activity. Rather, both are engaged in representation and, as such, both can be thought of as

[14] see Frisby, D. "Introduction" to T.W.Adorno, et al, *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, trans. Glyn Adey and David Frisby, (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. xii. Frisby takes this breakdown of Positivism from G.H. von Wright *Explanation and Understanding*, (London: 1961), p. 4.

related enterprises. At the same time, there is something specific about the correlation between Gombrich's theory and the objects he describes. That is to say, Gombrich's conception of his own relation to representational art is replicated in his account of how representational art relates to the world it pictures. The metaphor of the "searchlight" extends to the representational artist's conception of his relation to the object he depicts, and the process of representation reinforces and affirms the same idea in the artist and the viewer. While there might be serious philosophical and methodological arguments to undermine Kantian epistemology and the Positivist methodology it often seems to spawn, the relevance of these strategies is underpinned by their apparent replication in the object of their description.

I have already argued that a similar order of unity is absolutely central to *Aesthetic Theory*. Adorno, invoking Hegel, calls it "freedom towards the object". Parts of Adorno's argument, like Gombrich's, are mutually supporting by implication. Dieter Peetz has defined Gombrich's theory of representation as "Realist" on the grounds that "there is at least partial subversion of belief by the spectator that s/he is seeing.[15] This does not need to be read as suggesting that in Gombrich's theory a representation is ever mistaken for what it represents. Rather, Gombrich's "searchlight" always illuminates yet never understands itself as an act of illumination. Adorno's method and the art he is interested in are systematically committed to revealing the act of illumination as such.

An idea of the complexities involved in this kind of systematic noncompatibility between the different intellectual programs of Gombrich and Adorno is signaled in the "Positivist" dispute between Adorno and Popper, which began at the German Sociological Conference in 1961.[16] Gombrich identifies very closely with Popper; in the Introduction to

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[15] Dieter Peetz, 'Some Current Philosophical Theories of Pictorial Representation', *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 27 (Summer 1987), p. 228.
[16] T.W. Adorno, et al, *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*.

Art and Illusion he writes, "I should be proud if Professor Popper's influence were to be felt every where in this book". In other words, the dispute between Adorno and Popper is of more than thematic relevance to reading Gombrich.

A defining characteristic of the "Positivist" dispute emerged as a disagreement so profound and systematic that there was very little possibility for fruitful discussion, let alone agreement. In this respect Adorno's and Popper's dispute echoes aspects of Gombrich's confrontation with Hegel and Hegelianism in art history. David Frisby has written of the dispute, that

> A discussion of methodology usually presupposes that we know and agree on the object to which the methodology is related or at least that there exists some measure of agreement as to where this object lies. In the present dispute this is not the case. Some protagonists do not recognize as a genuine object what others regard as the real object of social research. That the methodological standpoints and their interpretations are divergent, suggests that methodology may not be taken in isolation from its object nor from the critical reflection upon its own activity.[17]

What needs to be emphasized is that in neither instance can the disagreement be distilled to one particular issue. As Frisby puts it: "The diversity of issues which are contained in the positivist dispute... suggests that there is not merely one but several disputes taking place." This idea is particularly relevant here because it mirrors the range of scenarios in which the "searchlight" metaphor embeds itself.[18] Frisby notes that one critic of the positivist dispute has argued that, from a methodological standpoint, the controversy manifests itself at three levels:

> Firstly, whether the role of sociology is the replication or reproduction of existing social reality or rather whether it is to be concerned with the transformation of that reality; secondly, whether sociology engages in its empirical world historically or unhistorically; finally, whether theories generated possess a globalizing or individualizing tendency.[19]

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[17] David Frisby, "Introduction" to Adorno, T.W. et al, *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, p. xxviii.
[18] David Frisby, "Introduction" to Adorno, T.W. et al, *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, p. xxx
[19] David Frisby, "Introduction" to Adorno, T.W. et al, *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, p. xxx.

If we substitute "Sociology" for "art theory" here then we can begin to develop a more subtle understanding of the differences between *Art and Illusion* and *Aesthetic Theory*, beyond the obvious idea that the former is based on a realist paradigm and the latter anti-realist. Taking the first question, are Gombrich and Adorno concerned with the replication or reproduction of art, or with its transformation? This is straight-forward, Gombrich: aspires towards the former, Adorno the latter. In *Aesthetic Theory* art is made to "speak" by its critical unfolding through philosophical discourse; art and philosophy are mutually inseparable and philosophical aesthetics is not, for Adorno, a matter of thinking about general rules which must be seen to apply in every instance. Second, do their theories engage art historically or unhistorically? Again the difference is clear. Adorno seeks to define his own position as thoroughly historical, while Gombrich understands his own position to be objective and ahistorical. Gombrich's approach is unhistorical, in the sense that he does not find it necessary to build into his methodological relationship with his object an acknowledgment of his own historical existence. Third, where Gombrich isolates principles that ostensibly hold for art from the Egyptians to the Impressionists, his theory is globalizing. Adorno, by contrast, restricts his observations to a comparatively minute aspect of the history of art.

This last contrast is worth considering at some length because one of the most important arguments in *Aesthetic Theory* emphasizes the discontinuity of avant-garde art from the past.

A Hegelian critique of *Art and Illusion*

On Gombrich's terms, the antithesis between his own and Hegel's position ostensibly revolves around an argument about the causes of stylistic transformation in art. Gombrich

sees Hegelianism as placing emphasis on external causes for this transformation; Gombrich argues change is fundamentally internal, deriving from the activity of representing itself. In theoretical writings such as "Meditations on a Hobby Horse"[20], the Introduction to *Art and Illusion*[21] and "Hegel and Art History"[22], Gombrich is uncompromising in excluding the possible impact of external influences on stylistic transformation, but he tends to be less uncompromising in less theoretically self-conscious writing. It has been suggested this is because he softens his position on the relevance of context. As David Summers has pointed out, the second chapter of *Art and Illusion* ends with the sentence "The form of a representation cannot be divorced from its purpose and the requirements of the society in which the given visual language gains currency".[23] For Summers it is equally true that Gombrich does not develop the implications of this statement. Whilst acknowledging the distinction between Gombrich's theoretical writing and his confrontation with specific works of art, the critique of his theory is still relevant to his practice because, as I have argued, the attitude suggested by the metaphor of the "searchlight" extends beyond its theoretical origins and into his practice.

The difference between Gombrich and Hegel, then, is not a rigid polarity between internal and external explanations for stylistic change; both allow for both. Rather, it is a question of emphasis. For Gombrich, stylistic transformation always takes place within certain limits derived from his definition of perception in general and art in particular. Since for Gombrich art is a form of perception, and perception itself has an unchanging dynamic, any changes in art take place within already defined limitations. For Hegel, by contrast, experience *in toto* is subject to transformation. This implies the possibility of far more radical

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[20] Ernst Gombrich, "Meditations on a Hobby Horse", pp. 1-11.
[21] Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, pp. 3-25.
[22] Ernst Gombrich, "Hegel and Art History", pp. 3-9.
[23] David Summers, "Conditions and Conventions: on the disanalogy of art and language", in Kemal and Gaskell, (eds.) *The Language of Art History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 202

change in art than Gombrich allows for. It is here that the "searchlight" metaphor comes under renewed pressure from a different quarter.

For Gombrich's skill-based explanation for stylistic transformation to work, he not only has to prove its plausibility, but he has to discount the relative significance of other pressures that might account for stylistic change. Having dismissed Hegelian arguments, Gombrich considers it necessary to emphasize the stability of the psychological make-up of the individual, at least that part of it which is involved in the production of images:

> There are few historians today, and even fewer anthropologists, who believe that mankind has undergone any marked biological change within historical periods. But even those who might admit the possibility of some slight ossilation in the genetic make-up of mankind would never accept the idea that man has changed as much within the last three thousand years, a mere hundred generations, as have his art and his style.[24]

This argument juxtaposes a claim for a consistent physiological basis for perception with the manifest changes in style in the history of art. Since the mechanics of perception do not change, but style does, changes in perception are discounted as a possible impact on style. The putative stability of perception therefore functions in a two-fold manner for Gombrich. It counters the legitimacy of Hegelian claims that changes in perception might affect art, and serves as a precondition for the methodological success of his own argument. That is to say skill can only have the determining impact it does on style if other influences are given a secondary role, if they are not completely excluded. More subtly, by invoking the idea of physiological constancy as a guarantor for the unchanging nature of perception, Gombrich characterizes perception itself as physiologically determined.

When this argument is confronted with the Hegelian principle of mediation, two things happen. First, the notion of presenting physiological evidence as a defense for the constancy of perception appears spurious. For Hegel, we transform and constitute ourselves in the process of perception which, *qua* the process of mutual modification of mind and

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[24] Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, p. 18.

world, cannot be reduced to its physiological constituents. Second, since perception is constitutive of our subjectivity, it is in essence transformative. The idea that it might provide some objective base for judgement is erroneous. Gombrich in fact recognizes a symptom of this argument in the methodology of Hegelian art historians. In the introduction to *Art and Illusion* Gombrich criticizes Hegelians for the circularity of their arguments:

> If we really want to treat styles as symptoms of something else (which may on occasion be very interesting), we cannot do without some theory of alternatives. If every change is inevitable and total, there is nothing left to compare, no situation to reconstruct, no symptom or expression to be investigated. Change becomes a symptom of change as such, and to hide this tautology, some grand scheme of evolution has to be called in...[25]

Without questioning the pertinence of this kind of criticism of Hegelianism, it should be obvious by now that the clarity of Gombrich's insight into the inadequacies of Hegelianism are, at least to a degree, mediated by the systematic and methodological incompatibility of his own argument with Hegelianism. Where Gombrich sees "Change as a symptom of change as such" it is as valid to argue that in Gombrich's argument the opposite is true. The rigid delineation of the parameters wherein change can be conceived as taking place become evidence for continuity.

The methodological tendency to diagnose continuity is especially evident in Gombrich's account of the production of art. His argument is contingent on artist's being seen to behave in a particular way. This is to say, for Gombrich, the history of art is about finding solutions to a fundamentally unchanging problem associated with representation. If artists stop producing representational work and so remove themselves from the crucial tension between "making" and "matching", it is difficult to see where Gombrich's system can go. By comparison with the extraordinary richness of Gombrich's engagement with representational art, he has very little to say of any substance about non-representational art.

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[25] Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, p. 18.

Specifically, there seems to emerge a radical incompatibility between the cohesion of Gombrich's whole system and art which does not conform to the representational paradigm. This is where *Aesthetic Theory* can be read as taking over. Just as Gombrich's theoretical and methodological predispositions match very well with the representational art he is describing, the same holds for *Aesthetic Theory* in its relation to non-representational art. Just as the systematic integrity of *Art and Illusion* based on the "searchlight" model of perception, gives the work an extreme closeness to its object, so *Aesthetic Theory* has a similarly close relation to its object in identifying and exemplifying the multiple implications of the "searchlight" metaphor in the process of its disintegration.

To characterise *Aesthetic Theory* as taking over where Gombrich leaves off is a useful way of situating *Aesthetic Theory* within the debate about the definition and significance of modern art. There are two obvious reasons why *Aesthetic Theory* occupies an odd position within this debate. First, since the inception of modern art, one of the ways it has been defined is as anti-mimetic. Second, it is precisely because mimetic theories of art were so manifestly unable to understand modern art that they came to be seen as obsolete. If Adorno was interested in mimesis and pre-modern art, or anti-mimesis and modern art, then we could understand the logic of his position in terms of a certain parity between a concept and the objects it is being used to describe. By bringing together "mimesis" and "modern art", one of the things Adorno is doing is reinvoking the crisis modern art provoked for the theory of art *qua* a theory of art as imitation. This can be put another way by arguing that the crisis of the idea of art as mimesis was not just that mimetic theories were not inclusive enough to allow for, say Post- Impressionism, but that mimesis seems to have been a *sufficient* definition for art. In this sense, the crisis of mimesis in art is the crisis of the theory of art. Danto has described this scenario as follows:

> In terms of the prevailing artistic theory (Imitation Theory), it was impossible to accept these [post-impressionist paintings] as art unless inept art: otherwise they could be discounted as hoaxes, self-advertisements or the visual counterparts of madmen's ravings. So to get them accepted *as* art, on a footing with the *Transfiguration* (not to speak of the Landseer stag), required not so much a revolution in taste as a theoretical revision of rather considerable proportions, involving not only the artistic enfranchisements of these objects, but an emphasis upon newly significant features of accepted artworks, so that quite different accounts of their status as artworks would have to be given.[26]

Adorno's idea of the mimetic potential of modern art flies in the face of the the process Danto describes. Adorno's idea of mimesis is radically different from the "Imitation Theory" Danto alludes to as marking the distinction between, say a work of Post-Impressionism and a work of the Renaissance. At the same time, the levels of crisis, and particularly the theoretical implications Danto diagnoses, are relevant to understanding the trajectory of *Aesthetic Theory* in its confrontation with modern art. In this sense, although *Aesthetic Theory* was written in the 1960's, it might be thought of as being concerned with that moment of theoretical crisis Danto describes. Like other theories of art that emerged out of the crisis of the "Imitation Theory" Danto's engaged in "a theoretical revision of rather considerable proportions... an emphasis upon newly significant features of accepted artworks, so that quite different accounts of their status as artworks would have to be given". If, at the time, the enfranchisement of the Post-Impressionists was a major motivation for theoretical contortions, by the time *Aesthetic Theory* was written, enfranchisment is not a problem; indeed it had been succeeded by absolute cultural assimilation. Adorno is not simply, or even primarily, concerned with the collapse of the old "Imitation Theory", but with countering the various revisions and alternatives which have emerged out of it, including the kind of position Danto goes on to articulate and defend. We could say here that Adorno is interested in reanimating the crisis precipitated by the demise of the old "Imitation Theory" by undermining the various theoretical responses to it.

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[26] Danto, A. "The Artworld", *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol 61, 1964, pp. 573.

In holding together "mimesis" and "modern art", one of the things that certainly happens is a reconfiguration of the concept of mimesis while maintaining its judgemental character. Under the old "Imitation Theory", theory had a critical edge: if it is not an imitation it is not art. After the "Imitation Theory", the question for theory becomes in part how it can accommodate the new art. In other words, the value of the new art is accepted as given by theory; it is just a question of adapting the theory to allow it to articulate this. What Adorno is unrelentingly hostile to are the assimilatory tendencies of theories of art which succeeded the "Imitation Theory". This is not to argue that Adorno yearns for the good old days when judgements were critically secure in the knowledge that Art = imitation. The "Imitation Theory" itself is critically incomplete, even for the kind of art it includes. If we think of one of the problems motivating *Aesthetic Theory* as the attempt to derive a critically sustainable basis for judging art, then this is both a very old problem which has never been resolved, but it is also new because the crisis of the "Illusion Theory" is really the collapse of those factors which allowed it to be sustainable, despite its deficiencies.

The prevailing response to the collapse of the "Illusion Theory" has been to open the critical floodgates. Certainly a lot gets through and new kinds of work come to be accepted as art. What stops everything from being accepted as art, Danto argues, are institutional controls. Since some kind of discriminatory activity is taking place, judgement appears intact. By comparison with the clarity and finality of the "illusion theory", however, in the new situation the criteria of judgement become diffuse and its grounds difficult to evaluate. In this scenario Adorno seeks to maintain and define the possibility of the critical judgement of modern art and it is his commitment to discriminating between 'live' and dead art works which makes *Aesthetic Theory* different from traditional aesthetics and art history.

The Scope of Aesthetic Theory

Chapter 1 of *Aesthetic Theory* begins with a series of truth claims about art and extrapolates their implications for the practice of aesthetics. Thus described, the opening of *Aesthetic Theory* seems relatively straight-forward. At the same time, this is a work whose presentation does not necessarily mirror the way its apparently distinct claims about art and aesthetics were generated. It would be misleading to identify separate origins for Adorno's claims about art and aesthetics, because these claims are mutually dependent.

In the Draft Introduction Adorno signals the importance of acknowledging this mutual dependence where he makes a familiar criticism of traditional aesthetics. He suggests that traditional aesthetics makes normative claims for art and aesthetic experience, while extrapolating them from the experience of a relatively narrow range of art. Arthur Danto has expressed a virtually identical opinion of philosophical aesthetics, saying

> the irrelevance of esthetic theory is due to the fact that it has often been a response to a particular body of art and of limited application to another order. Plato, Aristotle, Hume and Kant, powerful and sympathetic thinkers all were giving universal validity to thoughts suited to a very local art, so that in large measure, esthetic theory is a body of criticism concealed as such by the unacknowledged provincialisms of its authors.[27]

For Danto, the unacknowledged provincialism of aesthetics signals its demise and clears the way for his institutional theory of art. For Adorno, as we have seen, this implies the need for the reorientation of philosophical aesthetics in the way it understands its relationship to art. Adorno makes explicit claims about the specificity of the art with which he is concerned, and juxtaposes these with claims about the appropriate response by aesthetics. In so doing, one aim is to make the provincialism of his position visible, another to re-empasize the inseparability of his theory of aesthetics from his consciously provincial idea of art. This mode of procedure does not have to be construed as a simple softening of traditional

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[27] Arthur Danto, *State of The Art*, p. 4.

aesthetics; it is also the necessary response to an understanding of the thoroughly historical nature of the idea of art. In other words, Adorno may be critical of the provincialism of aesthetics, but this is not just a negative criticism. There is the suggestion that these provincialism's are far from debilitating; on the contrary, they are the basis for the possibility of aesthetics in the first place.

> Art, we said, is different from empirical reality. Now this difference itself does not stay the same; it changes because art changes. History, for example has transformed certain cult objects into art long after they were first produced. Or, to give another example, at a certain moment in time certain art objects have ceased to be viewed as art. In this context the abstractly posed question of whether a phenomenon like the film is art or something else is instructive, although it leads nowhere. As we saw, art has changing scope and it may be just as well not to try to define sharply what's inside and what's outside of it.[28]

In other words, Adorno's emphasis on the historical dimension of art, and therefore ofaesthetics, does not reduce art to a purely historical or social phenomenon. It is a recognition of, and emphasis on, his assertion that the *idea* of art changes through history. Considering this claim, Adorno understands philosophical aesthetics to be historically located within its own tradition, its society, but also within its relationship to whatever is the prevailing operative idea of art.

The obvious strategy in response to this notion of art would appear to be consciously to develop an idea of the limits of one's project by, for example, defining a historical time frame and operating within it. Adorno's constellation of "reification", "modern art", and his modifications to philosophical aesthetics, are all symptoms of something like this. At the same time, such a narrowing of focus does not guarantee the adequacy of any claims he makes. The difference between not recognising one's provincialisms and attempting to acknowledge them may be something, but it hardly represents a break through in aesthetics. A way to reconsider what Adorno is doing is to look at how he reframes the criticism already

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[28] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 3.

made of traditional aesthetics: "Philosophers are used to distinguishing conceptually between two types of origin, one belonging to metaphysics, the other to primal history. Upholding this distinction too rigidly leads however to a distortion of the literal meaning of the concept of origin."[29] In other words, the metaphysical and historical origins of representation are inseparable. What is necessary is an attempt to understand the specificity of artworks, not just from philosophy, but through their place in the history of art. Thus "The definition of art does indeed depend on what art once was, but it must also take account of what art has become and what might possibly become of it in the future." So, although it is wrong to take one art and extrapolate universals from it, it is equally wrong to engage one art in isolation from its place in the history of art. This implies that "What are called questions of aesthetic constitution are demarcated by the tension between the motive force of art and art as past history. It is through its dynamic laws, not through some invariable principle that art can be understood."[30]

With this we can begin to realign the way we think of *Aesthetic Theory*. Although preoccupied with modern art, a large part of Adorno's argument is concerned with analysing the differences between it and the art of the past, and a concern with what modern art implies for the future of art. Directly attributable to this are arguments in *Aesthetic Theory* which make historical claims about pre-modern art, descriptive claims about existing examples of modern art, and prescriptive claims about what modern art implies for the future. Having established the principle that aesthetics and its object are partially determined by their own respective histories, we can examine the way Adorno configures this particular relation as it pertains to *Aesthetic Theory*.

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[29] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 3.
[30] *Aesthetic Theory*, p.4.

Adorno is writing at a particular moment in history, and he makes a quite explicit claim about this moment: "Everything about art has become problematic: its inner life, its relation to society, even its right to exist." We can legitimately understand this overt and specific invocation of the historical moment to apply to the time when *Aesthetic Theory* was written, which is the 1960's. Equally, this claim is a diagnosis of the failure of revolutionary modern art of the early years of the century. It is in the light of his prognosis of the failure of the avant-garde that Adorno's argument describes what art ought to be aiming for, not its existing condition. At the same time, his prescriptions are often expressed in the present, rather than in the future tense. An effect is to give the impression that he is describing the existing condition of art.[31] More contentiously, descriptive and prescriptive statements frequently have a polemical edge which gives his argument a combative tone. Sometimes the language and argument of *Aesthetic Theory* echoes early avant-garde manifestos, sometimes modernist criticism, sometimes history, sometimes philosophical aesthetics, sometimes Marxism. This deliberate confusion of presentational strategies, serve in *Aesthetic Theory* to undermine any distinction between philosophy, history and criticism.

A blurring between the descriptive and prescriptive is nothing new, especially within the tradition of critical accounts of twentieth-century art. Controversy over how and why this art is significant is inseparable from its development, but the way different arguments have been presented has varied enormously, as have their aspirations. From the first arguments over the significance of Cubism, through Greenberg, to analysis of the current condition of art, one of the more familiar critical strategies has been to frame established achievements of the past in a way that justifies a particular approach to present practice. This is rightly

[31] Zuidervaart uses the terms "retrospective" and "prospective" to distinguish Adorno's different treatment of premodern and modern art, but he also notes that within the discussion of modern art Adorno engages both in defining an aesthetic for existing works, and for a future art. It is this, second contrast, within his discussion of modern art, with which I am concerned here. see Zuidervaart, L. *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1991), pp. 56-7

condemned when writing history, but less commented on in manifestos and criticism which tend, by definition, to be more overtly partisan, and are accepted as such.

At the same time, the contrast between historical and critical writing is tenuous, because at best, it signals little more than an author's intent. As a result, controversies which surround the reception of theories of modern art have sometimes manifested themselves, not as disputes about content, but as debates about the status of claims a particular theory may, or may not, be making. This confusion has been especially typical of the reception of Greenberg's theory. For example, one of the more naive objections to aspects of his criticism has questioned the dogmatic and prescriptive presentation of some of his descriptions of the history of modern painting. This misreads him by dissociating his theory from the context in which it was first articulated; whether his history of modern painting was right or wrong is of secondary interest to its function in defining a context to underwrite the practice of early Abstract Expressionist painters.

As we have seen, Adorno does not conceive his discussion as relating directly and unproblematically to its object; its combative tone signals an engagement with the on-going dispute about the meaning and significance of modern art. Obviously the same goes for Greenberg, but a part of the problem with Greenberg's theory was its success in surviving the historical and critical moment of its origin to become, for a while, the dominant account of the history of twentieth-century art. The transition from criticism to history, from prescription to description, derives from the way his writing moves seemlessly between polemic and argument, concealing their differences. As an author, Adorno is committed to attempting to pre-empt the kind of unthinking reception which was the fate of Greenberg's theory, a reception which was arguably a function of the author's, and some of his subsequent readers', need to look for some presumed foundation from which to understand modern art.

Aesthetic Theory's combative tone, then, derives in part from the explicitness with which the author invokes and heightens our awareness of its disputatious critical context. Adorno achieves this by defining aspects of his argument against other theories, serving to clarify his position, and keeping us in mind of competing claims. He mixes prescription and description and, unlike Greenberg, does so in a manner which attempts to make us aware of their confusion and its implications.

Unlike Greenberg's theory, Adorno's did not develop out of a rapport with an emerging category of art. By the mid 1960s, when he was working on *Aesthetic Theory*, the kind of high modernism which the work is sometimes described as defending was far from new. This is not to claim Adorno's theory of modernism is any less partisan than Greenberg's, but Adorno's relation to the art he is defending is neither as materially or as historically proximate - an irrelevant observation if its purpose is to argue the validity or otherwise of either theory. What it does is signal the potential for their having radically different motivations. Greenberg's theory of modernism is essentially an attempt to assimilate an emerging form into the tradition of the avant-garde. Adorno is clear that this function of the critic is actually counter-productive:

> This integration is not, as the progressivist cliché would have it, some posthumous benediction that says this or that artistic phenomenon was meet and proper after all. Reception tends to dull the critical edge of art... Once art works are buried in the pantheon of cultural exhibits, their truth content deteriorates.[32]

What is at stake in *Aesthetic Theory* then is not the attempt to make modern art acceptable, but the opposite. One facet of the crisis of modern art Adorno is confronting in *Aesthetic Theory* is precisely that it has become accessible. What Adorno is attempting to achieve through his argument is to re-invoke the atmosphere of artistic and cultural crisis which can

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[32] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 325.

accompany modern art. Crisis is invoked both in the arguments he presents in defence of modern art, but also in their presentation. So it is that he writes,

> The great expanse of the unforeseen which revolutionary artistic movements began to explore around 1910 did not live up to the promise of happiness and adventure it had held out. What has happened instead is that the process begun at that time came to corrode the very same categories which were its own reason for being.[33]

"Modernism" as Cultural Crisis

The way Adorno re-generates the crisis of the early avant-garde in *Aesthetic Theory* has a distinct pattern which can usefully be compared with the way he begins *Negative Dialectics*. At the beginning of *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno identifies a significant moment in the history of art, and describes it from the perspective of the present as having failed in as much as it is characterised as not having fully realised its potential. In the Introduction to *Negative Dialectics* he defines his philosophical project as dealing with the implications for philosophy in the light of Hegel's failure: "If Hegel's dialectics constituted the unsuccessful attempt to use philosophical concepts for coping with all that is heterogeneous to those concepts, the relationship to dialectics is due for an accounting in so far as his attempt failed."[34] As we have seen, Adorno is completely committed to Hegel's aspiration that philosophy should aim "to use philosophical concepts for coping with all that is heterogeneous to those concepts". As is also obvious to Adorno, Hegel failed to do this properly, and this means revisiting Hegel's characterisation of the task of philosophy and the way he went about fulfilling it. The stakes in doing so, however, are not just a matter of philosophical interest. Rather, the "task would be to inquire whether and how there can still be a philosophy at all, now that Hegel's has fallen, just as Kant inquired into the possibility of

[33] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 1.
[34] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 4.

metaphysics after the critique of rationalism."[35] So although Hegel's aspiration for philosophy remains intact, the fact that he failed, and that the nature of his failure is far from obvious, puts philosophy itself in jeopardy. This means that Adorno's configuration of his own position as a philosopher is both absolutely immersed in the history of philosophy, specifically Hegel's critique of Kant and, at the same time, it is potentially extremely anti-philosophical, in so far as he expresses a doubt about the possibility of doing philosophy at all. *Negative Dialectics* begins with one of the more familiar sound-bites by which Adorno is known, and this expresses his paradoxical position:

> Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realise it was missed. The summary judgement that it had merely interpreted the world, that resignation in the face of reality had crippled in itself, becomes a defeatism of reason after the attempt to change the world miscarried.[36]

The simultaneous emphasis on the necessity of philosophy and his skepticism towards it manifests itself in Adorno's hostility to the various empiricist and positivist inheritors of the neo-Kantianism of the late nineteenth-century, but also the anti-rational claims of Orthodox Marxism and Heidegger. In other words, Hegel's aspirations remain relevant, because they were unrealised, but this cannot be allowed to slip into a "defeatism of reason", either of the Marxist or Heideggarian variety.

The problem for Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory* is more complicated because he is characterising two different traditions as having failed, while remaining relevant because of their failures. In the Draft Introduction he has presented us with his diagnosis of the demise of traditional aesthetics, and on the first page of chapter 1 he describes what he sees as the failure of early avant-garde art. We have already considered at some length Adorno's account of the failure of traditional aesthetics and the implications for the future of aesthetics. His diagnosis of the failure of the early avant-garde takes the following shape:

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[35] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 4.
[36] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 3.

> What at first looked like an expansion of art turned out to be its contraction. The great expanse of the unforeseen which revolutionary artistic movements began to explore around 1910 did not live up to the promise of happiness and adventure it had held out. What has happened instead is that the process begun at the time came to corrode the very same categories which were its own reason for being. An ever-increasing number of things artistic were drawn into an eddy of new taboos, and rather than enjoy their newly won freedom, artists everywhere were quick to look for some presumed foundation for what they were doing. This flight into a new order, however flimsy, is a reflection of the fact that absolute freedom in art - which is particular - contradicts the abiding unfreedom of the social whole.[37]

Returning to the earlier discussion of how Adorno reconstitutes the way aesthetics must confront its object historically, in the sense that it is understood as shaped by its relation to the past and to the promise for the future, we have here a series of important truth claims which seem to hover between the historical, descriptive and prescriptive. Adorno gives us some clear indications of precisely how he is going to confront art in *Aesthetic Theory*. The crisis of the early avant-garde springs from its emerging "autonomy", which in this context means a "freedom from external purposes". It is this which differentiates the art with which *Aesthetic Theory* is preoccupied from the art of the past and gives modern art its "radical specificity". It is the uniqueness of the problems of modern art which is the basis for Adorno's claim that the methods of aesthetics, which may have been relevant to the art of the past, are inappropriate for the analysis and description of modern art. At the same time, although "autonomy" gives modern art its identity, it is precisely the inability of modern art to live up to the implications of its autonomy that constitutes its crisis. For Adorno this implies the necessity of revisiting the problem of art's autonomy and seking a more useful way of confronting it.

Adorno gives the following reasons for the crisis in art which all derive from its "autonomous" state: 1) the emergence of art's autonomy began to "to corrode the very same categories which were its own reason for being", 2) "rather than enjoy their newly won

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[37] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 1.

freedom, artists everywhere were quick to look for some presumed foundation for what they were doing", and 3) "absolute freedom in art - which is particular - contradicts the abiding unfreedom of the social whole."

Now, keeping in mind the comparison of the beginning of *Aesthetic Theory* with the beginning of *Negative Dialectics*, we see a similar series of paradoxical implications begin to emerge. On the one hand, art's "freedom form external purposes" suggests a utopian potential which resonates and radicalises Kant's famous phrase "purpossiveness without purpose". Kant always maintains the necessary link between art and its tradition, where Adorno's principle of "autonomy" means the separation of avant-garde art from tradition. Acknowleding the importance of a defining tradition, autonomy also implies the potential impossibility of art as a consequence of the corrosion of the categories which gave it its *raison d'être*. This leads Adorno to question the possibility of art: "as Hegel realised, art can no longer afford to be naive art. Nowadays artistic sophistication amalgamates itself with a *naïveté* of a different and stronger kind, which is an uncertainty about the purpose of art and the conditions for its continued existence."[38] Again, as with Adorno's ambivalent attitude regarding the possibility of philosophy, with art we are presented with a similar paradox. On the one hand, Adorno expresses what still looks like an extremely controversial "uncertainty about the continued existence of art" while also rejecting theorisations of radically anti-art positions. For example, he explicitly distances himself from Marcuse's *The Affirmative Character of Culture*, saying "A rabid critique of culture is not the same as a radical critique of culture. As culture is not completely wrong just because it failed, so affirmation in art is not completely wrong either."[39] How does this tension between the collapse and necessity of culture play out in *Aesthetic Theory* in terms of the tradition of the reception of modern art?

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[38] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 2.
[39] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 357.

Aesthetic Theory and the crisis of modern criticism

The proposition that the definition of painting can stretch to include both representational and non-representational works is the most radical claim in the history of art criticism. At the same time, the grounds on which such continuity is diagnosed vary and carry consequently varied implications for the way we think of painting after the critical assimilation of abstraction. *Aesthetic Theory* engages this debate, but intervenes from what seems to be an unfamiliar and even old-fashioned position. As we have seen, it does not attempt to alleviate the crisis resulting from the rejection of mimesis critically, but to re-emphasise the crisis as continuing. That this kind of argument should appear unfamiliar or possibly tendentious is, in part, a tribute to the success of modernist criticism that has aimed to underwrite the legitimacy of abstract painting by emphasising its continuities with the past. Indeed, it is as a polemic against the supposedly successful critical assimilation of abstract painting, with the associated implication that it has ceased to be problematic, that we must read the second sentence of *Aesthetic Theory*: "Everything about art has become problematic: its inner life, its relation to society, even its right to exist". Again, this is not a lament for the past, but the rejection of the *grounds* on which abstract painting has been justified by modern criticism and the *effects* of this justification on the way we think of painting.

Having said this, it is not sufficient to think of *Aesthetic Theory* as an alternative solution to the problem of abstract painting as that problem is defined by modern criticism. On the contrary, *Aesthetic Theory* does not accept the premises on which modernist criticism diagnoses mimesis and abstraction to be in conflict. This is not to say that Adorno necessarily argues that mimesis and abstraction are not contradictory categories, but that modern criticism over simplifies their relation, failing to understand the range of implications arising

out of the rejection of mimesis by modern art. To see how *Aesthetic Theory* does frame this relation it is important to understand that, at least in part, it is a reaction against modern criticism and the assumptions upon which it diagnosed the apparent incompatibility between mimesis and abstraction.

That in painting mimesis and abstraction have come to be accepted as mutually corrosive categories is because abstract tendencies are identified as impeding the conditions necessary for mimesis to work. A traditional way of historicizing this idea has been to argue that modernist painting progressively undermined the mimetic relation between art work and the world by emphasising the material quality of the painted surface. This thesis has been criticised on a variety of grounds, but it remains intrinsic to the general understanding of a broadly based tension which animated late nineteenth and early twentieth-century painting. Indeed, an emphasis on the conflict between the idea of painting as representation and painting as object has become so much a part of our grasp of the development of modernism in painting that it is not obvious how the relation between mimesis and abstraction might further be usefully explored. In considering some of these arguments, however, the emphasis will not focus so much on their claims, whose strengths and weaknesses have already been explored and debated extensively. Rather, we will examine their possible motivations and the needs they fulfil in our historical and critical understanding of the development of modern painting.

Traditionally, criticism has concentrated on the problem of establishing the grounds on which non-mimetic works might be considered art. In other words, its self-appointed task has been to legitimate non-mimetic art *per se*. One strategy for doing this has described the transition away from representation as evolutionary, i.e. gradual and inevitable. Obviously Greenberg's work is the classic example of this approach, although it is not unique. Alfred

Barr's famous diagram on the frontispiece of *Cubism and Abstract Art* operates in a similar way,[40] as does Gleizes' and Metzinger's *Du Cubisme*, the first section of which opens: "To estimate the significance of Cubism we must go back to Courbet."[41] *Du Cubisme* proceeds to work its way through Manet and Cézanne explaining how their work predicts, but falls short of Cubism. This kind of argument tends to attribute value to individual works by virtue of their place in an evolutionary chain that links them convincingly to earlier representational works of undisputed worth.

Another influential critical response to the rejection of mimesis by art has been to argue that it had always been a spurious compliment to the formal qualities of a painting. Probably the best known argument along these lines is Clive Bell's *Art* where the author famously declares,

> Let no one imagine that representation is bad in itself; a realistic form may be as significant, in its place as part of the design, as an abstract. But if representational form has value, it is as form, not as representation. The representational element in a work of art may or may not be harmful; always it is irrelevant.[42]

The strategy of Bell's argument is not to abandon systematic aspirations, but to isolate the universal 'art' character of all art works. In the early years of the century this kind of argument was associated with an empiricist bent in formalist art history which emphasised the importance of the art object held in isolation from auxiliary and often circumstantial, biographical, historical and sociological information. Wölfflin's hugely influential stylistic history of art tended to have a similar emphasis on *stylistic autonomy* and a consequent separation of form and content. The latter was often considered as "as a 'mere pretext' for the exercise and display of significant constructs".[43] As Gerd Wolandt has suggested these

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[40] Francis Frascins, *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, (London: Harper and Row, 1985).
[41] H.B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art*, p. 207.
[42] Clive Bell, *Art*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1949), p. 25.
[43] Michael Ann Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 25.

tendencies towards formalism, empiricism and the idea of a universal essence of art actually "made it easier for the history of art to comprehend the early phase of modern art".[44]

Philosophical Aesthetics and Art History

Adorno's approach to the emergence of modern art is antithetical to arguments which emphasise its continuities with the art of the past and is inseparable from his commitment to judging art. His emphasis on the necessary historicity of aesthetic questions not only transforms aesthetics, but has important implications for the practice of art history. *Aesthetic Theory* implies the relevance of problems of judgement for art history.

Formalist art history relies implicitly on aesthetics for its grounding, at least to the extent that the art historian's concern with form is underwritten by the aesthetician's argument that it is this self-evident and constant aspect of art which defines it as such. Indeed, it has been suggested that the development of art history as a discipline with scientific pretensions was made possible by the preceding emergence of aesthetics as a legitimate and independent philosophical enterprise.[45] Paradoxically however, the potential for this limited, but important, partnership between aesthetics and art historical formalism depends on sustaining a distance between them. Just as history is irrelevant to aesthetics, so for the formalist art historian the suggestion that a work of art needs any kind of philosophical justification is an impertinence. This is, and must be, taken for granted. Without the certain knowledge that the object of the formalists attention is art, and that it is defined as such by its formal qualities, formal analysis is presented with the possibility of its own irrelevance. Formalist art history depends on taking for granted the value and meaning of art to the extent

[44] Gerd Wolandt, "Philosophical Aesthetics and Empirical Research in Germany", *British Journal of Aesthetics* 18 (1978), p. 79.
[45] Gerd Wolandt, "Philosophical Aesthetics and Empirical Research in Germany", pp. 72-80.

that the issue becomes transparent and invisible, literally disappearing from the field of issues that the art historian needs to address. So, although philosophical aesthetics and formalist art history would seem to be two sides of the same coin, the stability of their relation is paradoxically dependent on holding them apart. The universal aspirations of aesthetics risk being tainted by history; the empirical 'facts' of formalist art history are undermined by questions about the value and meaning raised by aesthetics. Although superficially different, an art history which takes for granted the value of its objects as art, and a cultural criticism which reads art works as symptom of wider tendencies, are similar. Their similarity resides in the exclusion of the question of what it is that gives an object value from the description of that object.

It has already been suggested that the possibility of a "scientific", and therefore academically legitimate art history, depended on some guarantee of objectivity that aesthetics seemed to be in a position to fulfil. The potential problems within this relation were to some extent avoided by the increasing insularity of academic philosophers in the early twentieth-century and a parallel tendency of scholars in all fields to bequeath "the problem of knowledge" to these professional philosophers.[46] To this extent the separation between empirical research and questions of value and meaning in art history was part of a wider tendency and is obviously not exclusive to art history.

In Panofsky's critique of Wölfflin a significantly different attitude to the necessity of describing an object in terms of an explicit engagement with the judgement of what gives it value emerges. This was not an overt challenge to the relation between art history and aesthetics; rather it was an issue generated out of art history. The issue at stake concerns the justification for practising formalist art history a justification which should be supplied by

[46] Larry Laudan, *Progress and its Problems: Towards a Theory of Scientific Growth*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

philosophical aesthetics. It is in this sense of recognising the necessity for justifying the practice of art history, rather than an overt interest in aesthetics, that Panofsky signals the possible assimilation of aesthetic problems into the practice of art history. Indeed, Panofsky's critique of Wölfflin is one episode in a German tradition of art history which Michael Podro has argued "aimed to explore particular works in the light of our conception of art - of those principles which governed art as a whole."[47] Given this aim, the tradition which Podro identifies clearly impinges on questions of art's definition which is properly identified as the territory of philosophical aesthetics. With regard to this, Panofsky in particular was concerned to ensure that the basic assumption of the difference of art from other historical objects be incorporated into the way art historians describe it. A key motivation for his project was that he regarded Wölfflin as an example of an art historian's failure to guarantee the adequacy of this relation. In *The Principles of Art History* Wölfflin famously compares Renaissance and Baroque styles on the basis of five pairs of opposite "categories of beholding".

Panofsky's accusation is that while Wölfflin's concepts are invaluable in describing works of art, they do not do so in a way that is self-evidently pertinent to these objects' status as art and, according to Podro,

> Panofsky challenged, *inter alia*, Wölfflin's concepts in the *Principles*, not because he doubted their descriptive aptness, but because he queried their critical relevance - or, at least, held that this needed to be shown. Wölfflin's concepts were dependent upon empirical observation of individual works and lacked any guarantee that such critical observations were pertinent.[48]

The significant implication of this criticism is that it signals the potential for a different relation between philosophical aesthetics and art history. It implies that the art historian must be clear about why an object is a work of art, and integrate that explanation into its historical

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[47] Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art*, (Newhaven: Yale University Press, 1982) p. xv.
[48] Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art*, p. 179.

description. As a background to Panofsky's argument, Michael Ann Holly has noted that when art history was developing in the nineteenth-century, its approach to art was to a great extent determined by the organisation of museums.[49] It was felt that works of art could and should stand by themselves, needing no explanation beyond the bare minimum of facts. Wölfflin's activity as an art historian derives its justification from this institutional framework of values, and in this sense his formalist method might be said to be based on a deferred judgement that the objects which he scrutinises are art. Precisely because formal qualities were taken for granted as the "art" in art works, it was not necessary for Wölfflin self-consciously to attempt to explain why he isolated certain of their formal characteristics for description.

Vasari and Winckelmann, each a candidate for the title of being the first art historian, both operated under the assumption that the question of judgement and history are inseparable. Both were unequivocal in identifying antique beauty as the standard against which all subsequent art could be judged, both adhered to a cyclical view of history to explain why this standard was not constantly upheld. Equally important, Vasari's *The Lives of the Artists* (1568) and Winckelmann's *History of Ancient Art* (1764) are, at least to some degree, polemical works. This is not simply a function of their author's commitment to the standard of antique beauty. Rather, both books were written at times when their authors perceived the necessity of defending the classical ideal of beauty. Vasari wrote after the death of Michaelangelo, who, in Vasari's judgement, achieved the pinnacle of perfection, surpassing even classical standards. According to the logic of his own argument, the pinnacle he has identified inevitably implies the cycle of art history to be in immanent danger of decline. So when he famously wrote,

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[49] Michael Ann Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 25.

> I have endeavoured to distinguish between the good, the better and the best...I have tried as well as I know how to help people who cannot find out for themselves how to understand the sources and origins of styles.[50]

He was not only simply recording history. Rather "He wrote, above all, for his fellow artists, and his purpose was to establish and maintain artistic standards"[51]. Similarly, Winckelmann saw his *History of Ancient Art*, not simply as a history and explanation of the progress and decline of Greek art, but as a "theoretical treatise, aiming to demonstrate, through the example of Greek art, what beauty was."[52] The very fact that this was perceived to be necessary suggests the standard of antique art to be in question.

Now, this discussion is not necessarily aiming to locate *Aesthetic Theory* with a tradition of art history which makes the question of value explicit. Rather, it seeks to bring a wider perspective to the charges of Adorno's elitism. For example, for Zuidervaart a major difficulty in accepting *Aesthetic Theory* is the problem of why Adorno limits his argument to the defence of such a narrow range of art. Zuidervaart asks if the dismissal of heteronamous art can be countered without doing undue violence to Adorno's position. Zuidervaart identifies a problem in *Aesthetic Theory* through his characterisation of the work in the following manner:

> Theodor W. Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* carries the tradition of Marxist aesthetics to a new level of sophistication. The book develops a complex model of the social mediation of art, and it provides a sustained mediation on the social significance of autonomous art.[53]

Zuidervaart's argument is not simply an act of exegesis, it is also performative; it locates the problem of art's autonomy within a quite specific and well defined history of Marxist aesthetics, and the criticisms Zuidervart makes of it are defined by the preoccupations of that

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[50] Georg Bull 'Introduction' to Giorgio Vasari *Lives of the Artists*, (London: Penguin), p. 14.
[51] Georg Bull 'Introduction' to Giorgio Vasari *Lives of the Artists*, p. 14.
[52] Gombrich, "Hegel and Art History", p. 3.
[53] Lambert Zuidervaart "The Social significance of Autonomous Art: Adorno and Bürger" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 48 (Winter 1990), p. 61.

tradition. Specifically Zuidervaart focuses his attention on what has been one of the most abiding criticisms of *Aesthetic Theory*, namely Adorno's reluctance/inability to deal with "heteronomous" art. He writes,

> By "heteronomous art" I mean art that has not become relatively independent from other institutions of bourgeois society and whose products are produced and received to accomplish purposes that are directly served by other institutions of bourgeois society and whose products are produced and received to accomplish purposes that are directly served by other institutions. The term covers both traditional folk art and contemporary popular art. Examples of heteronomous art would cover everything from liturgical dance to tribal masks, from advertising jingles to commercial movies. If such art lacks autonomy, a crucial precondition for truth in art, then one begins to wonder about the legitimacy of measuring it according to the criterion of truth.[51]

A broadly similar criticism of the narrowness of Adorno's aesthetics is Andreas Huyssen's claim that "both Greenberg and Adorno are often taken to be the last ditch defenders of the purity of the modernist aesthetic, and they have become known since the late 1930's as uncompromising enemies of mass culture."[55] Thomas Crow says,

> The implicit contention of modernist theory - and the name of T.W. Adorno for modern music can be joined to that of Greenberg for the visual arts - was that the contradiction between an oppositional art and a public with appetite for no other kind of opposition could be bracketed off, if not transcended, in the rigor of austere, autonomous practice.[56]

A related criticism is voiced by Peter Bürger when he claims that

> Lukács and Adorno argue within the historical institution that is art, and are unable to criticize it as an institution for that very reason. For them, the autonomy doctrine is the horizon within which they think. In the approach which I propose, by contrast, that doctrine as the normative instrumentality of an institution in bourgeois society becomes the object of an investigation.[57]

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[51] Lambert Zuidervaart, 'The Social significance of Autonomous Art: Adorno and Burger', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 48 (Winter 1990), p. 69.

[55] Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, (Bloomington Indiana University Press, 1986).

[56] Crow, Thomas. "Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts", in Frascina, F. *Pollock and After The Critical Debate*, (London: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 239.

[57] Bürger, P. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. lii.

These critics are all making slightly different points, but the continuing theme is the narrowness of Adorno's argument and his inability to say anything positive about 'heteronomous' art. At one level this criticism derives from the traditional philosophical that the value and usefulness of a truth claim is proportional to its scope. Adorno's critics assumes that a truth claim about all works of art will be more useful and interesting than a truth claim about a limited range of modern works. Second, none of these critics of Adorno begin to address is the strategic sigificance of Adorno's judgements within the disintegrating framework of his theory. The claims Adorno makes about modern art are not only significant in themselves but for their embeddedness in an argument which ruthlessly works out their infinitely complex ramifications. The process of doing so not only undermines these claims, but Adorno's argument itself begins to disintegrate under the weight of the attempt to give a complete explanation for the historically specific phenomenon.

Contrary to the accepted perception of *Aesthetic Theory*, like Hegel's *Aesthetics* and *Art and Illusion* it is consistent with itself to an extraordinary degree. For Adorno, however, "The ground of modernism is both the absence of a ground and the explicit normative rejection by modernism of a ground, even if there were one."[57] The nub is that from this perspective the order of consistency Gombrich and Hegel exemplify is unsustainable. What Adorno demonstrates is possible, however, is the inevitability of making ultimately unsustainable assumptions and their process of dissolution. The uniqueness of *Aesthetic Theory* is that it reveals this dynamic as taking place in unforeseen and unthought of ways in the attempt to conceive of the possibility of art in the twentieth-century.

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[57] *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 34.

CONCLUSION

Although the logic of a book implies a beginning and an end, *Aesthetic Theory* does not reach a conclusion. According to Adorno's paratactical schema each chapter relates to the others like nodal points in a matrix. There is therefore no help from Adorno on how to conclude writing about the work. At one level this is an echo of his understanding of the incomplete task of philosophy, but to over emphasise thematic incompletion would be to neglect the definitive claims he makes. *Aesthetic Theory* is not an endless play of signifiers on the model of a poststructuralist text; it is deliberately anchored to its objects by the claims it makes for them. Adorno makes specific claims about art in capitalist society which demand evaluation. Critics however, have failed to take account of the way the claims made for art in *Aesthetic Theory* take place within modes of argument which systematically undermine them. Adorno is thoroughly modernist in his defence of autonomous art but postmodern in his demonstrations of the impossibility of art.

Adorno's project can be situated in relation to Lyotard's well known definition of postmodernism. Lyotard has defined the state of postmodern knowledge as a series of distinct islands, each of which makes different and often mutually corrosive claims to know the world. What he neglects to say is that for the inhabitants of these islands of knowledge the situation he describes does not exist. For the islander it is his or her unique access to truth which gives self identity; the intention to be inclusive will always fail to deliver complete inclusiveness and will always exclude. *Aesthetic Theory* makes no such claims to inclusiveness, the shrillness of Adorno's defence of modernism is but one register of the way he works out the destruction of his own position.

A way to explain the strategic significance of *Aesthetic Theory* from a postmodern perspective is say that it is model for a mode of communication to exist between the islands of postmodernism. A pessimistic view of the work would say that the process of positing a claim and then showing it collapse simply designates a new register of autonomous practice; another island. This is the implication Jameson's reading of Adorno which seeks to isolate "structure" or "dialectic" as the source of Adorno's contemporary significance. In this thesis I have attempted to demonstrate that this is an incorrect reading of Adorno. The collapse of philosophy which is taking place in *Aesthetic Theory* does not come out of Adorno's abstract urge to develop an anti-philosophical method. This is what Derrida is trying to do. On the contrary, Adorno seeks to allow material reality to "speak" and so transform philosophy in its very attempts to be better philosophy. Philosophy is in a state of dissolution because its attempt to perfectly represent its object leads it to strain against the limitations of its conceptual medium. Mimesis takes place between the inadequacy of the stringently applied philosophical concept and the object it seeks to represent.

In *Aesthetic Theory* this dramatic tension is played out in the relation between philosophy and art. Adorno is unique among post-Enlightenment philosophers in the way he configures that relationship. Since Kant's *Critique of Judgement* philosophers have projected onto this relationship an image which contrives philosophy as rational and art as sensuous. The failure of philosophical reason gave rise to a tradition which projected onto art the function of an antidote to the failure of philosophy. With the crisis of modernism however, the failure of art to properly take over the mantle of truth from philosophy has given rise to a variety of skepticisms which have found their clearest support in the endemic reluctance to pass judgement on anything. Lyotard calls this "tolerance for the incommensurable" and defends postmodernism for its inclusiveness. Adorno's thought

does not square with the momentum of this paradigm because he does not accept its model of the relation between philosophy and art. The point of his separation from this tradition of thinking is his conviction that art is not philosophy's irrational other, but that philosophy *contains* the irrational. The irrational persists in philosophy in the philosopher's continued deployment of concepts in the knowledge of their inadequacy. Doing philosophy in the knowledge of its terminal inadequacy is thoroughly irrational. *Aesthetic Theory* is committed to making this irrationality visible. It involves making visible the debilitating provincialisms which make it possible and these are revealed in the mimetic moment of philosophy as it tries to assimilate its concepts to particular objects.

Beyond Adorno's strategic position within the history of post-Kantian philosophy, his modes of procedure suggest themselves as paradigms for the practice of art history of twentieth century art. Adorno may have something to say about the art history of other art, but as I argued in the chapter comparing *Aesthetic Theory* with *Art and Illusion*, the strength of both works derives from a deep seated systematic unity with the art being discussed. Indeed, to attempt to extend the relevance of *Aesthetic Theory* beyond modernism would be to attempt to universalise his thought in a way quite at odds with its radical specificity. It would be much better to concur with the momentum of *Aesthetic Theory* and agree that pre twentieth century art is a cultural and political irrelevance.

Within the discipline of art history there is an established split between theorists who have sought to import the implications of poststructuralism from literary criticism from traditional art historians who remain committed to an empirically driven practice. Adorno's principle of mimesis as it is played out in *Aesthetic Theory* is a model which brings together an extreme theoretically derived self-consciousness about the potential worthlessness of what he is doing with a commitment to understanding the concrete

object. In practice, this implies the necessity for exhaustive attention to the conditions which govern the reception of a work *and* the work's own configuration. These tasks are demonstrated by Adorno as definitively inseparable. In other words an abstractly theoretical approach to art history is just as useless as an approach which thinks it is being empirical. In combining both perspectives Adorno pays attention to three kinds of question. How have I come to think the way I am thinking? How has the object before me come to be the way it is? How does the immediate context of my confrontation with the object configure my experience and representation of it? In answering these questions Adorno does two things. First, he thinks them through in terms of their implications for modernist art and represents, more thoroughly than anyone, the falling of modernism into postmodernism. Second, the power of Adorno's critical intelligence exemplifies his claim that the irrational is not some realm beyond reason, but that it is part of critical thinking and the objects confronted by critical thought. For the art historian this implies the necessity for an intensity of reflection on the three orders of mediation described above. *Aesthetic Theory* itself falls short, but its most important implication for the art historian is the way it frames what art historical ambition should be.

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